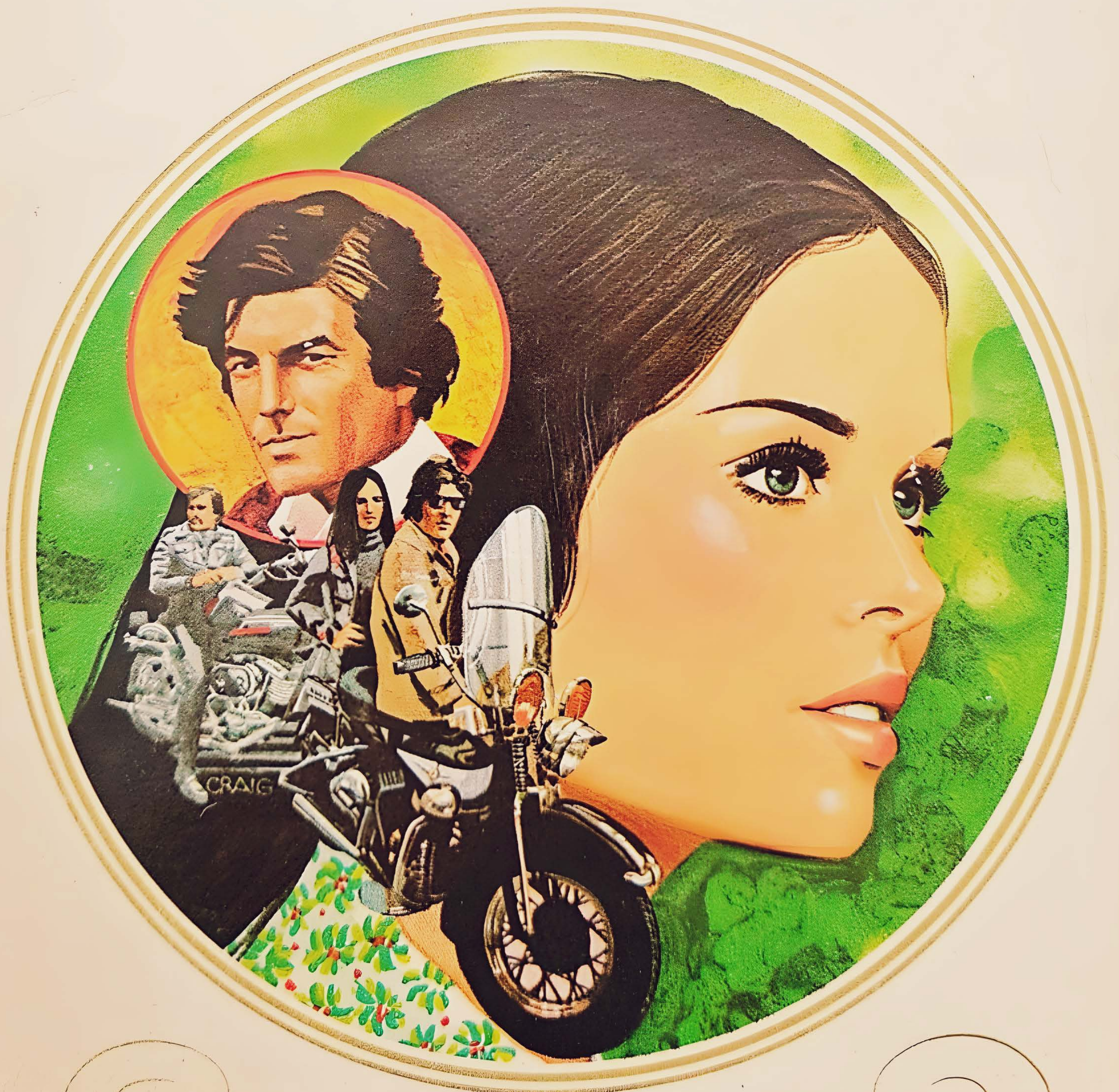


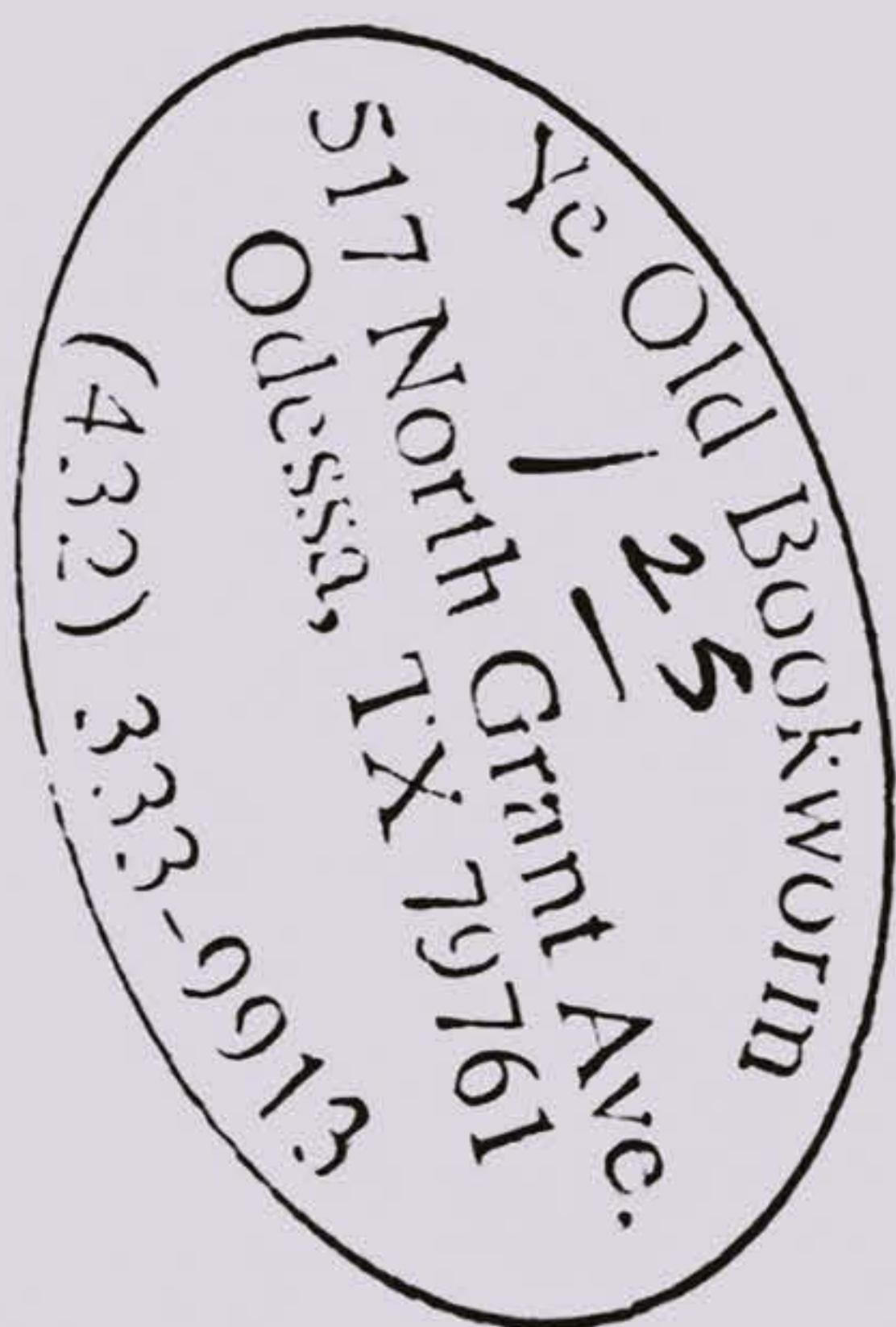


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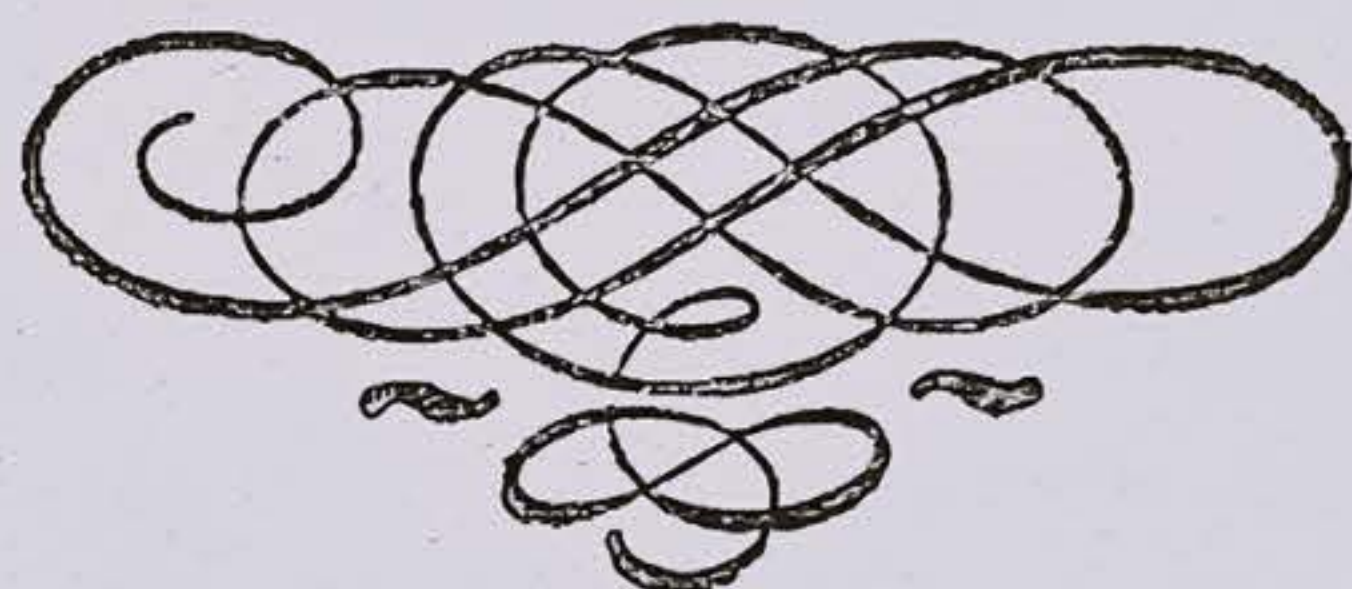


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CHAPTER ONE

'WHERE did you get it?' Jody whispered, awed.

Rod shuffled his feet impatiently. 'What does it matter where I got it? The main thing is, do you like it?'

'Of course I like it.' Jody's voice lost its awed tone and became almost disinterested. She lifted the exquisite marcasite watch from its bed of scarlet velvet. Resting it on the palm of one hand, she ran the fingers of her other over the sparkling strap. 'You stole it, didn't you?'

'Why must you always jump to that conclusion?' Rod hedged.

'Because ever since I've been going with you I've never known you to buy anything that you could get for nothing.' She pulled up the sleeve of her leather jacket and slipped the watch on to her wrist. She fumbled awkwardly with the clasp for a few seconds before she was able to clip it into place. Holding up her arm, she twisted her wrist this way and that, watching the marcasite wink at her under the blue rays of the street light.

Rod sighed. 'Okay, I stole it. So what?'

'Because you promised to take me along on your next raid, that's so *what!*' Jody flared, pulling down the sleeve of her jacket. Jerking her crash helmet from the handlebars of his motorbike, she pulled it on, fastening it securely under her chin.

'Well, the rest of the guys decided against taking any girls along. It was a big job; Sturtevant's in Broadway. We just couldn't risk any hold-ups. . . .'

'Hold-ups!' she cut in. 'Let me tell you. . . .'

'Here's the rest of the gang,' Rod interrupted swiftly, as the roaring sound of about eight powerful motorcycles was heard farther up the street. He swung on to his cycle and turned to her. 'Come on, Jody, hop on, and for crying out loud, don't start being difficult by throwing tantrums!'

'Where are we going?'

'Larry's Inn. Where else?'

Jody sighed. 'Where else?' she repeated, climbing up behind him and slipping her arms around his leather-clad waist.

The stairs leading up to Larry's Inn were dark, painted black and left unlit. The interior, however, was exactly the opposite. Walls were painted bright shocking colours and the smoky atmosphere lit with clashing coloured lights. Weird pictures were hung here and there and music blared forth from the band which was being played by four youths, all of whom had longish hair and wore outfits of shocking pink suits and navy shirts. Jody had been here with the gang many times before and so seldom took any notice of her surroundings which would appear strange to anyone else.

She sat down at a nearby table and waited for Rod to bring her her coffee. She unclipped her crash helmet and hung it on the corner of a picture hanging just above her. Then, resting her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands, she sat listening to the gang shouting to make themselves heard above the din of the band.

All at once she felt a peculiar desire to laugh. How silly it seemed when one thought about it — coming up here to talk, and yet it was so noisy it was almost impossible to hear oneself think. Suddenly, it all seemed such a waste of time and energy.

She looked about her. Tonight the bright colours seemed even brighter, hurting her eyes, and the atmosphere even

smokier and overcrowded and the noise of the band even noisier. She studied the faces of everyone in the gang, one by one. The girls, with make-up applied to make them look like ghastly white ghosts with black eyes and long, lank, dyed hair. 'I look like that!' she thought, incredulously.

They were dressed in anything and everything, from tight jeans and leather jackets to men's football jerseys worn as mini frocks. She turned her attention to the boys, who, all similarly dressed in jeans and leather jackets, were lounging on their stool-type chairs with their hands bunched in their pockets. Their overall appearance could be aptly described as untidy and scruffy and with, perhaps, an overlay of dirt.

With a sigh, Jody leaned back against the wall and felt it vibrate as the music filled the rather small and confined space. It was so loud that she could feel, and perhaps hear, the even thud of her heartbeat which made her uncomfortable, as if she was half expecting it to stop. When she did fail to feel or hear it, she would find herself sitting rigidly on her chair, concentrating intensely until she could hear its regular thudding once more.

'You're quiet tonight. What's up?' Rod leaned back, away from the group, to speak to her. 'Still mad at me for not letting you come along?'

'No.' Jody shrugged carelessly. 'The cops will more than likely catch up with you in the end anyway, and I can't afford to be involved with this lot. If I get into any more trouble, I'll probably end up in Borstal or something. I'm bored enough as it is . . .' Her voice trailed off. She was getting tired of trying to yell above the noise.

'Want to dance?'

'What?'

'I said, do you want to dance?' Rod repeated, louder.

Jody laughed. 'Whereabouts? There's more room on the tabletops than there is on the floor.'

'That doesn't usually worry you.'

'Well, it does now! I'm beginning to hate feeling as though I'm in a football scrum when I'm meant to be dancing. Oh, I'm so fed up! I want to do something — something different!'

'How about all of us taking off to Raumai — with a couple of flagons?' suggested Don, another member of the group, who had leaned back to listen to their conversation.

Jody turned on him scathingly. 'Raumai may be very beautiful, but I have no intention of going there with any of you lot during the day, let alone at night. Why can't you ever think up something original, instead of wanting to follow up every idea that comes into your one-track mind?'

Don gave a shrug which said: 'Well, you can't blame a guy for trying,' and then turned back to the gang.

'His idea is different. — and original — as far as you and me are concerned,' Rod said.

'Rod!'

'Well, all the other girls. . . .'

'I don't care about all the other girls!' Jody snapped, getting to her feet.

'Where are you going?'

'I don't know. Anywhere. I'm fed up with this place. The music is too damn loud!'

'Okay, where do you want to go that's different?'

'Let's try the Flamenco. You know, that new coffee lounge in Broadway.'

Rod turned to the gang. 'How about it then? Shall we cut along to the Flamenco?'

'Come on,' Len jeered. 'You have to wear ties and tails to get in there.'

'You don't!' Jody retorted. 'Well, are we going or not? If not, I'll go by myself.'

'Okay, let's go. We'll give the locals a thrill and show them how the other side lives.'

The roar of motorcycles shattered the silence of the night as eight machines sped through the quiet, almost deserted square in the centre of the city.

The Flamenco Coffee Lounge was situated on the city's main shopping thoroughfare, Broadway, and was completely different from the one they had just left. They all clamoured up the stairs and more or less blundered into the softly lit lounge, looking ridiculously out of place in the Spanish-styled surroundings of red drapes and walls and gold trimmings. It was furnished throughout with darkly varnished tables and chairs. On the walls hung gold mirrors and large tapestries of Spanish dancers.

Because it had gone ten-thirty, the lounge was filled mostly with the after-picture crowd, nearly all of whom looked up as the rough, untidy group of teenagers ordered coffee and sat down, taking up a few of the tables nearer to the dance floor. Latin-American music played softly, from records this time, and not a band, and could be heard only faintly throughout the two sections of the lounge.

Jody yawned. 'I wish they'd turn the music up. It's sending me to sleep,' she said loudly, attracting a few stares from neighbouring tables.

'And I wish you'd make up your mind,' Rod grumbled. 'Before, it was too loud.'

She shrugged. 'Well, that was before. Now here the dance floor is empty and I feel like dancing. Len, go and ask them to turn the music up, will you?' She got to her feet and taking off her leather jacket, she slung it over the back of her chair and held out her hand to Rod. 'Coming?'

'Wait until the music is louder.'

'I'll dance with you.' Gerry got to his feet, only to be pulled down again by his girl-friend, Ruth.

'You're drunk. Sit down, drink your coffee and sober up,' she said.

Jody looked at him in surprise. He hid the fact that he was drunk pretty well, she thought. However, upon looking at him more closely, she could see that his eyes were slightly bloodshot and heavy-lidded.

'Oh well, I'll dance by myself,' she announced, moving slowly to the Latin American beat, her tall, slim body clad in a snug-fitting white polo-neck top, black tight jeans and patent leather boots. She moved faster and faster as the beat became louder and more pulsating. She was a good dancer and had an ear for rhythm which any of the people now watching her might have envied. As the track drew to an exalting end, she went over to draw Rod to his feet for the beginning of the next number. It was slower, but not without the familiar Latin beat.

'You were terrific,' Rod told her, moving her closer to him. 'Feeling better now that you've let off some steam?'

'Uh-huh,' she shook her head and grinned up at him. 'I feel like doing something . . .'

'Different?'

'Something utterly crazy, stupid, way out.'

'Like what?'

'I don't know.' She sighed. 'Like leaving town. It gets so boring here in Palmy, sometimes I could scream.'

'Then why don't you leave? Mind you, you won't get far without me.'

Jody's eyes flashed. 'You don't own me, Rod Bains, so don't think it. I can go where I please without asking your permission, and I would — if I could.'

'What's stopping you, then?'

'I'm on probation, stupid! Remember?'

'Of course. That shoplifting racket.'

'And doing damage to municipal property while under the influence of alcohol. Three more months.' Her expression was a mixture of wistfulness and discontent. She stared vaguely over his shoulder to where two men sat drinking coffee. Only subconsciously was she aware that they were looking at her.

'I've served my time for that shoplifting escapade, though I wish to hell I'd had wealthy relatives to pay my way out of it.'

'My wealthy relatives didn't pay my way out of that one. I was only fined, seeing as it was my first offence. Anyway, having wealthy relatives doesn't always pay in other ways,' Jody ended bitterly.

'You know, this being the seventh biggest city in New Zealand you'd think there would be something to do instead of just going to the pictures or coffee bars,' she said, changing the subject.

'Country dances.'

'Rats!' She waved her hand. 'They're so crowded, no one can move. For the population of Palmy, the accommodation is pathetic. Who was it said that on Saturday nights one could shoot a cannon ball down Broadway and never hit a soul?'

'Well, perhaps whoever organizes the entertainment regards the city's beauty sufficient for its residents. After all, ours is a beautiful city.'

Rod was not really bothered about the city's disadvantages — or beauty for that matter. He was quite content, Jody realized, to go on roaring around on his motorcycle, to see how much noise he could make; to go to work each

day at the local Freezing Works and to meet up with the gang at Larry's Inn during the week. To gatecrash on parties at the week-ends, drink all he could and spend Sundays in bed recovering from his weekly hangover. While, at times, Jody couldn't really care less whether Rod was either drunk or sober over the week-ends, there were times when his attitude infuriated her, and this was one of those times.

Pulling from his arms, she stamped her foot impatiently. 'Beauty!' she scoffed. 'When are you ever sober enough to notice whether or not the city is beautiful? Very seldom. Your docile attitude to go on to placidly accept things the way they are, when they could be bettered, makes me sick!' She flounced off the dance floor and flung herself into her seat.

Rod followed and sat down beside her, persisting to drape his arm around her shoulders despite her attempts to shrug it off.

'Say, do you know that guy over there?' Sharon King leaned over to whisper to Jody.

'What guy?'

'Over there, behind you.' Sharon motioned with her head. 'There are two of them sitting a few tables away. The younger one hasn't taken his eyes off you since we came in. I know because I've been watching him. He's not bad.'

Rod turned his head to follow Sharon's gaze. 'Of course she doesn't know them. And if he doesn't stop leering at her I'll see to it that he goes out of here without being able to open his eyes.'

Jody turned to look at the two men and in particular the younger one, then turned back to Rod, a sneer on her mouth. 'Who are you trying to kid? He's twice your size.'

Rod shrugged. 'So what? He doesn't stand a chance with

you, so why worry?’

Jody sat back from him. ‘Just what do you mean, he doesn’t stand a chance with me?’

‘Or you with him.’

‘And explain that crack too.’

‘Firstly, you’re my girl . . .!’

‘I’m not!’

‘And secondly, he looks like a respectable citizen, which is something you have no claim to. He probably wouldn’t be seen dead with you.’

‘He looks more like a farmer to me,’ Sharon put in. ‘They both do.’

‘Just not your type.’ Rod made to put an arm around her shoulders once more, but angrily she rejected it.

Standing up, she glared down at him. ‘You get this, Rod Bains, into that thick skull of yours. Firstly, I’m not your girl and secondly, we’ll see if he’s too damn respectable to be seen dancing with me — very much alive.’

Turning on her heel, she boldly approached the table where the two men were sitting.

‘Hi,’ she greeted the younger man, who from a distance looked older but at a closer study, Jody guessed that he would be little more than twenty or twenty-one. Without waiting for an invitation, in case it wasn’t offered, she pulled up a chair and sat down. ‘My name’s Jody Linton. What’s yours?’

Looking rather surprised, he answered: ‘Brent Slade, and this is my brother, Adam.’

Leaning her chin on her hand, Jody flashed her grin from Brent to Adam, who was not looking at all surprised at her boldness, but instead his eyes seemed to scrutinize her with an expression in them that read: ‘Typical,’ and wrote her off as a ‘brazen kid who should be kept from associating

with my young brother and I'm going to see to it that she is!

His eyes were hard and unfriendly as they met hers and immediately her own became cool and hard. She stared straight back at him for a moment before turning back to Brent. 'Would you like to dance?'

He was about to agree, his eyes lighting up eagerly, when his brother intervened. 'Thanks for your offer but we were just leaving.'

'But surely you have time for just one dance.' Jody stood up quickly, holding out her hand to Brent. She knew she had to have this dance with Brent for Rod's benefit, but because of Adam Slade's obvious desire to keep his brother from dancing with the likes of herself, she felt an added thrust of determination. Immediately Brent got to his feet, apparently forgetting his brother's existence. This gave Jody a thrill of triumph and she couldn't resist shooting a gloating smile in Adam's direction.

'Do you come here often?' she asked Brent in an effort to put him at ease. It was clear that he had not had much experience with girls like herself, or with any girls for that matter. He couldn't dance very well, and knowing this, and also knowing that Jody was an excellent dancer, made him feel at an even bigger disadvantage.

'Sometimes. We don't get into town very often.'

'You're a farmer?'

'Yes. My brother owns a farm out at Pohangina.'

'Mmmm. Special occasion tonight?'

'Adam's thirty-first birthday.'

Jody looked over at him. 'Not married?'

Brent shook his head. 'He's thirty-one and will, in all probability, celebrate his birthday at sixty-one still a bachelor.'

'And you? Do you intend to follow in your brother's footsteps?'

Brent shrugged. 'I don't know. I've got no way of knowing, have I?'

'Why were you looking at me?'

All at once he looked uncomfortably hot around the collar. 'You're a good dancer.'

'Oh — is that all?' she prodded, grinning up at him provocatively.

'I think you're well aware of your charms, despite the make-up and this gear you're wearing, without me having to tell you,' Brent said stiffly.

Jody's smile vanished. 'What do you mean — this gear I'm wearing?' she demanded.

'Well, it doesn't do much to enhance the charms you have got.'

Her lips tightened. She tried to pull out of his arms, but they tightened, making it impossible for her to do anything else but continue dancing with him.

'Oh no, you don't,' he said. 'You asked me to dance, remember? You're not going to just walk off on me like you did to that guy over there, making him look a prize idiot.'

'That guy happens to be my boy-friend!'

'Some way to treat a boy-friend! If you were my girl I wouldn't let you walk off on me and ask some other guy to dance.'

'I am not his girl, your girl or anybody's girl. No one owns me! I do as I please!' Again she made to pull away from him, but her efforts were futile. He was bigger and stronger than Rod and so she found that she wasn't able to leave him standing alone on the dance floor as easily as she had left Rod.

'You'd better let me go,' she warned him. 'The rest of the

gang are beginning to look mean. Rod especially.' This was true, for as she cast a look in their direction she knew that they had noticed her attempts to elude him and were beginning to get a little excited.

She saw Rod lumber to his feet and saunter over to them, followed by Len, Don and a few of the other youths.

'Come on, buddy. She's tired of dancing,' Rod said, standing with his legs astride and his thumbs hooked into the belt of his jeans.

Taking his time, Brent turned his head to look at him, not relinquishing his hold on Jody.

'Who says she is?'

'I say she is.' Rod jerked a thumb towards his own chest.

Brent turned back to Jody with obvious intentions of ignoring him. Instantly, Rod's hand shot out and descended on Brent's arm, swinging him around.

Jody, now free of Brent's arms, stood looking on, her eyes bright with anticipation and all her pulses thrilling to the excitement rising within her. So Rod was willing to fight for her, was he? Fight this farmer who was taller, heavier and stronger than he was? He would, no doubt, require help from a few of the others, but his reasons for fighting were clear.

In all her eager desire for excitement she quite forgot Adam, until he loomed between Rod and his brother, taller and bigger than either of them. 'Now what's going to happen?' she wondered, disappointment flooding through her. 'He could make mincemeat out of both of them.'

Aware of him looking at her, she felt compelled to meet his gaze. Even though the pale red lights were very dim, she could see the disgust for her clearly written in his eyes. Boldly, she lifted her chin and placed her hands on her hips.

'Now there isn't going to be any fighting. Here or anywhere else.' Adam's deep voice spoke slowly and deliberately, allowing his words to penetrate into the minds of those about him.

'I'm not afraid of this lot, Adam. I could take them all on — singlehanded!' Brent retorted, angry at his brother's intervention and feeling slightly foolish under the scornful glances of the youths, who gave hooting laughs at this remark.

Jody's eyes lit up again and she joined in.

'I'm,' Adam's voice cut sharply through their mocking laughter, 'quite sure that you could, Brent,' he went on, not looking at Brent but holding Jody's unwavering gaze with his own. 'But I have no intention of allowing you to lower yourself to the extent of — brawling in public — over a girl who has proved that she's nothing better than a bold and brazen hussy with the morals that go with being one.'

Jody's whole being went rigid. Her face whitened so that her darkened eyes were her only noticeable feature. With a swift movement she leapt forward and brought up her arm. But Adam caught her wrist and held it just as she was about to bring her hand down with her nails poised at an angle that would tear into the flesh of his face.

'You'll pay for that!' she hissed.

Giving her wrist a painful twist, Adam set her free, thrusting her away from him.

She glared at him, refusing to rub her aching wrist. 'Just you wait. I'll pay you back for this. You see if I don't!'

'Come on, Brent.' Adam turned his back on her.

Jody watched them go, her face contorted with fury. She was vaguely aware of the owner of the coffee lounge telling Rod that he would be obliged if they all left immediately.

'Don't worry!' She turned on him, causing him to back away, startled. 'We're going — and the sooner the better!' Flinging her jacket over her shoulder, she pushed her way through the small crowd of onlookers who had gathered.

'Well, where have you been?' a sharp voice inquired from the top of a wide, carpeted stairway.

Jody sighed, but didn't answer. Taking off her crash helmet, she placed it on the table just inside the front door, then smoothed down the sides of her long lank hair, flicking up the ends between her fingers.

'Did you hear what I said?' Footsteps descended the stairs.

'I heard you, Roseann. I wish to heaven you'd stop harping on at me!'

'If you heard then answer my question. Where have you been?'

'Just out with the gang.'

'You know you're not supposed to be out until this hour. If the police catch you . . .'

'They didn't.'

'But they will. You'll end up in Borstal yet.'

Jody shrugged out of her leather jacket. 'So what are you moaning about? It'd be just up your alley if I got put away, wouldn't it? Oh, don't kid yourself, you really can't wait for the day when you see the back of me.'

Roseann shrugged. In her forties, she was still a very attractive woman, always well dressed and well groomed, the type who was never seen without make-up or in hair curlers. 'I'm not,' she replied. 'There's been no love lost between us. Perry made the biggest mistake of his life when he agreed to take you on. You've succeeded in making a spectacle of yourself in this city and have done your level

best to drag both your uncle and me through the muck and mire with you.'

'Then you really should have let them put me away, shouldn't you?' Jody said sweetly to her aunt, who was now standing beside her.

'Don't worry,' Roseann muttered tightly. 'If it hadn't been for Perry paying your way out of that last little mess you got yourself into, then you would have been put away. I for one would have seen to that.'

'Oh, I'm sure you would have, Roseann, and then it would have been bound to come out about you and. . . .'

'Shut up, Jody!' Roseann's voice was livid.

Jody laughed. 'Don't worry so, Roseann,' she urged mockingly. 'Your sordid little secret is safe with me.'

'If Perry — if Perry ever found out. . . .' Roseann took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. 'You know what it would do to him — and his career.'

'And position, Roseann. Don't forget your precious social position. Just imagine what scandal would do to that.' Jody snapped her fingers.

'It would kill your uncle. Even if you hate me; think of your uncle who is your own flesh and blood!'

'Don't be so melodramatic,' Jody drawled loftily. 'I'm like you, Aunty dear, I think of no one but myself. I'll keep my mouth shut just as long as it suits me.' She slung her jacket over her shoulder and began to mount the stairs. With one hand resting beside the round light which was fixed on to the base of the banister, she paused and turned to meet her aunt's hostile gaze. She said lightly, her mouth curved into a sneer: 'By the way, where is Uncle Perry? In his usual position, clinging to the entertainment bar in the lounge, or perhaps draping over it, dead to the world?'

Roseann's eyes narrowed and glittered, and her hands

clenched themselves at her sides as she fought to control her impulse to lunge at the girl who stood, gloating and sneering, from the lower part of the stairs. To tear that smug, self-satisfied look from her face, beat her until she could. . . . Abruptly she checked her run of thought.

'You really would like to kill me, wouldn't you, Roseann?' Jody threw back her head and laughed. 'Then the Lintons would really hit the headlines. Boom!'

'Why are you doing this to us?' Roseann resorted to pleading, a resort that was becoming only too familiar to Jody. 'What have we ever done to you? Perry is one of the greatest council-members Palmerston has ever had. He has devoted nearly his whole life to this city and gained its trust and respect and now, because of you, he might soon have nothing. . . .'

'Except his grog,' Jody broke in in a bored tone that told she had heard this story many times before.

'He'd still give up his last cent for you.'

Jody yawned. 'Well, that's comforting to know, Roseann. Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll turn in.'

'Jody!' Roseann's voice was sharp and compelling, causing Jody to turn around to face her once more. She saw that her aunt's eyes were on the marcasite watch still strapped to her left wrist. Indolently, she lifted her hand and stated the time.

'We all get our just desserts, Jody, and you mark my words, you'll get yours. You're destructive, like a disease. You destroy people and things when it's within your power. You'll destroy yourself one of these days.'

Jody's lips curled into an unpleasant smile. She shrugged. 'Perhaps I will — who knows?' 'And who cares?' she added to herself.

Once dressed in her shortie pyjamas, she sat down in

front of her bedroom mirror and ran a brush quickly through her hair. She dismissed from her mind what her aunt had just said to her. It was Roseann's pattern. Her final resort was to make these dramatic statements when her pleadings often appeared to have little or no effect on Jody. She probably thought if she tried a little psychology, by frightening her with drastic little speeches full of threat and meaning, she might be jolted into a more what Roseann called 'human' frame of mind.

She threw her brush on to the dressing table and leaned forward to study her reflection. Her long reddish-tinted hair hung lank and untrimmed to her shoulders. It had long ago lost its gloss and shine since she had refused to treat it to regular and thorough washes and constant vigorous brushings. Her skin, now free of its mask-like make-up, was clear owing to the good food available and the fresh climate in which she lived. But it still didn't glow with pink good health as did so many other young ones of her age, and she knew that too much smoking and drinking and not sufficient exercise was the cause of this. However, over and above all this, she was still a very attractive girl, with wide hazel eyes, high cheekbones and wide and curving, but unsmiling mouth. A bold and brazen hussy, Adam Slade had called her, and with the morals that go with being one.

Her mouth tightened and thinned. Roseann, too, had in moments of rage called her exactly the same names as Adam Slade had done, and more. Jody had never bothered to dispute her aunt's accusations, or remind her of her own lack of morals. It wasn't worth the effort. Nevertheless, while she recognized her own faults, she knew that no one would ever have cause to call her a tramp, for she vowed never to place herself in that position and so far she hadn't.

She had taken these insults from Roseann without bat-

ting an eyelid. But from someone else, a man whom she didn't even know and in front of her friends and a crowd of strangers — this was something else again.

She got up from the stool, turned out the light and slipped into bed. Sleep constantly eluded her as she endeavoured to think up some way in which to get even with the big, dark farmer. 'You'll pay for this!' she had said — and she had meant it.

CHAPTER TWO

THAT was how it had all begun — an obsession to obtain revenge. Bud Jody, when she had set out to fulfil her ambition, did not, by any stretch of the imagination, foresee how it was to end.

A day or so after the coffee lounge incident, Brent called on her to apologize for his brother's harsh words and behaviour. To make amends he offered to take her out. Jody was quick to see her chance and took it, scarcely believing her luck. It was an opportunity dropped straight into her lap and she was determined to make the best she could of it. Knowing that Adam Slade was against his brother having anything whatsoever to do with her, what better way was there to get even than to have Brent Slade fall for her in a big way? In such a big way that he would put her first, even before Adam?

But would it work? Brent Slade was someone who was not of the same mould as Rod Bains and the rest of his sort. But she needn't have worried. Despite her scruffy mode of dress and the company she kept, she had always held a certain fascination for all boys — her wild, daring streak and touch-me-not attitude. And the nastier and colder she was towards them, the better they seemed to like it — and Brent was no exception.

On the day that Brent proposed to her, some two months later, he suggested that they go for a drive, perhaps to one of the beaches or out in the country. But Jody insisted that first they should break the news to Adam.

'Well, Mr. Slade, what do you think of that?' she laughed

when they were alone together in the lounge of his home at Riverview in the Pohangina Valley. 'How do you think I'd fit in here? Riverview is pretty lonely, but beautiful nevertheless.'

Adam took the news with surprising calm. It was a reaction which Jody hadn't expected or even imagined. But beneath this outward façade, she sensed that he was furiously angry. He told her in quiet, controlled tones: 'Why Brent should choose to marry a repellent little rough like yourself I can only guess. But I will tell you this. If Brent marries you then he will immediately forfeit any hope he may have of becoming my partner and half owner of Riverview.'

Jody smiled at him and, without asking his permission, she helped herself to a drink of Vodka and orange which she had spotted, together with other bottles of spirits, resting beside the bookcase. 'Who,' she asked confidently, 'do you think he'll choose? You or me?' She lifted the glass to her lips.

'As I've said, you're a repellent little rough. Riverview is a prosperous, and as you said, beautiful farm. I think I stand an even chance.'

But Brent chose her and she had fulfilled her ambition and had obtained revenge. The victory was hers, but she found now that she had it within her grasp she didn't really want it after all. She didn't want to marry Brent either. She wasn't even in love with him. And besides, life on a farm, no matter how beautiful, held no attraction for her at all. What on earth would she find to do? The mere thought of it was enough to give her all the courage she needed to break off with Brent during their drive that very afternoon. She could let Adam Slade sweat a little longer — but what the heck? To her it was just a game, a silly game of which

she was beginning to tire.

Little did she realize that it was also a very thoughtless and dangerous game — until after it was too late.

Driving towards Himatangi, one of the five beaches in easy reach of Palmerston North, and into the sun, Jody thought desperately, trying to work out in her mind just what she was going to say to Brent. And because she was so preoccupied, her full attention wasn't given to her driving. It wasn't until Brent began to shout at her to pull over that she discovered she was on to the treacherous Half Crown Bend. And because of the fierce glare of the sun, she didn't see another car approaching the bend from the other direction. However, Brent did. He grabbed at the steering wheel of the car and began pulling at it. The car swerved violently, but they were too far over and were going too fast to avoid a crash. They hit the oncoming car with a terrific impact.

Jody heard the crash of metal and splintering of glass. Above it all she even heard her own scream. For a weird few seconds she felt as though she was an article of clothing in a clothes-drying machine, being turned over and over and over. . . .

When she came to she found herself lying on her back on the grassy verge of the road. She could hear the sound of people talking and the slamming of car doors.

Struggling into a sitting position, she was amazed to find that she was perfectly all right with not so much as a broken arm or sprained ankle. There was no pain anywhere. She felt a little dizzy and lightheaded, but that was nothing. It would soon pass. She sighed thankfully. If she was all right then surely Brent would be too.

She looked around and saw that a number of people had pulled up in their cars and had ambled over to have a look.

at the two smashed cars. There was also an ambulance and several black police and traffic cars lined up at the side of the road. She made an effort to get to her feet, but was spotted by a couple of men in white coats who came to her side immediately and told her to remain where she was.

‘Brent . . . ?’

‘Everything is being done, miss. He’s trapped beneath the car.’

‘Is he all right?’

‘We don’t know yet. He’s alive, but unconscious. The owner of the other car seems to have escaped any serious injury but has been taken to hospital. Now, perhaps I could get a few things cleared up. If you could give us both your names and addresses. . . .’

‘No!’ She made another effort to get to her feet. ‘I’ve got to help. I’ve got to see!’

However, the two men forced her to remain where she was. ‘There’s no sense in you going over there. There’s nothing you can do. You’ll only be in the way.’

‘I’ve got to see!’ she persisted.

The two men exchanged glances. ‘Keep her here, Larry. I’ll fetch the stretcher and rugs.’

Only when Jody had been admitted into the hospital did she disclose their names and addresses. She was frightened. She knew that if she had told the police her name at the scene of the accident they would have probably recognized it and insisted that a breathalyser and blood test be taken. At that time it would have given them sufficient evidence to prove that she had consumed a quantity of alcohol not very long before the accident. But now it was too late for that. There was only one person she had to fear now — someone who could actually prove that she had been drink-

ing. Tense and on edge, she violently refused to let herself be examined for any injuries she might have sustained in the accident. She sat, alone, in the corridor not far from where doctors and nurses were doing everything possible to save Brent Slade's life.

She was still sitting there when the two swing doors of the corridor opened and the tall figure of Adam Slade strode through them. Instinctively, she shrank back on the long, empty seat. Her eyes, though wide with shock and fear, still retained a quota of their reckless defiance as they stared up at him.

'Where is he? Where is my brother?' he asked. It was an effort for him to keep his voice quiet and controlled. His face, rather grey beneath his tan, had aged considerably since she had seen him last.

Jody remained silent. She sat rigid, unable to move and unable to speak.

She still remained dumb as his hands, hard and ruthless, descended on her upper arms and jerked her to her feet. He shook her. 'My God, what I'd like to do to you!'

She tried to jerk free but was held fast. She shook her long straggly hair back from falling in front of her eyes, and began to tremble uncontrollably from delayed shock. 'I didn't mean this to happen. I didn't mean anything like this to happen,' she whispered at last.

'Mr. Slade!'

His fingers bit a little further into her arms before he flung her back down on to the stool, causing her head to crack sharply against the wall. He turned to face the doctor, who chose to turn a blind eye on what he had just seen.

'Would you come with me, please?'

Hours had passed since Adam had left. Jody was only

vaguely aware that her aunt and uncle had joined her and were sitting on the other end of the long narrow seat, but she continued to keep her head lowered and refused to acknowledge their presence.

She waited, not daring to think of what would happen if Adam Slade's younger brother should die. Not daring to hope that in letting him live, fate would be kind to her and give her another chance. Deep down, though, she knew that she didn't deserve another chance.

When Adam finally returned, Jody lifted her head and all the blood seemed to drain from her heart. She found herself thinking — thinking up every possible excuse for the expression on his face — shock, tiredness, hate. She only accepted the bare fact that it was grief when he said, harshly: 'Brent is dead.'

She fainted then and, with something like despair, she tried to cling to the shield of darkness protecting her from the outside world, wanting desperately never to wake up.

However, her days of successfully getting what she wanted seemed to be over, for she felt herself being quickly revived, after having first been stripped of her scruffy clothing of tight jeans, sloppy sweater and shabby sneakers, examined carefully, and then tucked in between crisp clean sheets on a high hospital bed.

She opened her eyes to find herself in a private room which was right then harbouring no more than a half a dozen people. Adam Slade stood beside two men, one of whom Jody instantly recognized as Detective Morgan, a man who had played a considerable and not too pleasant part in her life.

'You again,' she said involuntarily.

'Yes. Our meetings seem to be coming quite a regular habit, don't they, Miss Linton?' he said tonelessly, his

eyes cold and direct.

She glanced away from him towards the stricken figures of her aunt and uncle. They appeared to be looking back at her but without actually seeing her.

'There are a few questions Mr. Morgan wishes to put to you,' the doctor spoke to her. 'It won't take long. When he's finished, I'll give you a sedative that will make you sleep. You've suffered only minor cuts and bruises, so you'll more than likely be discharged tomorrow.'

From the corner of her eye, Jody saw Adam Slade's strong flexible hand tighten on the locker beside her bed, until the knuckles showed white against his rough sunburned skin. She lifted her gaze to his face, but his blue-grey eyes, as they met hers, were bleak and expressionless, displaying none of the bitter thoughts that must surely be going through his mind at what the doctor had just said. 'This girl, alive without so much as a broken limb, and my brother — dead!'

However, she knew that he was keeping a tight rein on his feelings and emotions. He was that type of man. 'As hard as rock,' she told herself, 'with an iron hand, will and heart — except perhaps where his brother was concerned.'

'Now, Miss Linton, if you would be good enough to tell me exactly what happened,' Detective Morgan went on in that same toneless voice.

Jody spoke, watching the man beside him take down what he was saying, and realized that this story would probably make news headlines. How was her uncle, as City Treasurer, going to hold his head up after this episode? He had managed to survive her last two minor escapades because of his position and the power and money it gave him, but rising above this one unscathed was going to take some doing. She smiled bitterly. 'Now Roseann really does have

cause to worry, more so now than she ever did before.'

'This is not a laughing matter!' Detective Morgan rapped. 'Now you listen to me, Miss Linton.' He leaned down towards her. He had his foot resting on a stool under the bed and his arm lying across his knee. 'This is the third time you've been in trouble — first, for shoplifting and second, for causing damage to municipal property while under the influence of liquor. Okay, so you got off pretty lightly there, seeing your uncle had money and influence and was able to pay your fine and pay for the damage — to put it bluntly, he was able to pay your way out. Well, this time, I doubt whether you'll be quite so lucky. This time, I'm going to see to it that you pay for the death you caused.'

Jody made an involuntary movement away from his face. 'Are you threatening me? Because if you are, then let me tell you you're wasting your time. It was an accident. It was something that couldn't be helped. You can't blame me for an accident.'

'Were you driving?'

'No!'

'You were! Brent Slade vouched for that before he died and it could be seen from the positions into which you were flung that you were the driver and Brent Slade was the passenger. That lie was a foolish move.'

'Okay, so I was the driver.'

'Now, tell me what happened — precisely this time.'

'We were driving along Pioneer Highway . . . !'

'You were driving!'

'Okay, I was driving.'

'Whose car?'

'Brent's, of course.'

'Did you ask if you could drive it?'

'Yes, of course. How else . . . ?'

'All right, just stick to answering my questions. Was he willing or reluctant to let you take the wheel?'

'He'd do anything I asked.'

'Don't hedge! Was he in the slightest way reluctant to let you drive?'

'No!'

Morgan sighed and brought his hand down against his thigh with such a sharp slap that she started violently. 'Miss Linton, we're going to go over this story and over it and over it again, until you decide to tell me the truth. Now before Brent Slade died he made a statement which varies somewhat from the one you're trying to put across. While we have no reason to doubt Brent Slade's word, we have every reason to doubt yours. Right, that last question again . . . !'

'Okay,' Jody interrupted, 'Okay, he didn't want me to drive. But I made him let me. He does — he did anything I asked. What does all this have to do with it anyway?'

'You'll see. Carry on with your story.'

'I was driving along Pioneer Highway, towards Himatangi Beach. The sun was setting and I was forced to slow down because I couldn't see very clearly and also because I was approaching Half Crown Bend . . . '

'What speed did you slow down to?'

'About forty-five. I don't know exactly how it happened, but I must have been on to it sooner than I realized. I heard Brent shouting at me to pull over; that another car was coming. I tried to pull over, but I couldn't see, so Brent started pulling at the wheel and then the next thing I knew the car was turning over and over. I thought it would never stop!' She could feel perspiration breaking out on her skin and down the middle of her back as she relived those cru-

cial few seconds. The horror of having to fight against hands which held her back and to gaze at the mangled wreckage which had once been Brent's car, knowing that underneath it Brent was trapped and unconscious.

She lay, feeling her nerves tautened to snapping point. Her nails clutched and rasped against the linen sheets beneath the hospital blankets. She wished fervently that everyone would clear out and leave her alone.

'Were you drunk, Miss Linton?' Detective Morgan's relentless voice went on.

Jody's heart gave a frightened jolt. 'No!' Her denial came at once, swift and positive.

'Had you been drinking? Had you consumed any liquor whatsoever before you drove Brent Slade's car?'

She felt as though her whole body was bathed in perspiration. She turned hot and then cold as she realized what the truthful answer to this question could mean. It could give Morgan all the evidence he needed to do exactly what he had threatened — make her pay.

She looked up at Adam, but he might have been a stone statue for all the signs of life that were visible in his face. Desperately she lied, 'No!' Still she kept her eyes trained on Adam's face. Not a flicker of expression passed over it.

'Why doesn't he say something?' she thought frantically. 'Why doesn't he refute what I've just said? Revenge would be his by just saying a few words.'

Still Adam remained silent. Oddly enough, even Detective Morgan was at rather a loss for words for the first time and seemed quite put out by it. Where could he go from there? All he needed was to be able to prove that this young roughneck had had one too many before the accident and his case would be bound and sealed. Tests could have

been taken, but by the time they had learned the name of young Slade's companion, who had refused to speak or co-operate in any way, it had been too late. For the tests, if they had then been carried out, they would have failed to show any positive results. What he needed now were witnesses and probably the most likely witness would have been Slade himself.

'Just one more thing, Miss Linton . . .'

'No! I refuse to answer any more questions. I refuse, do you hear me?' Exhausted and bewildered, she felt herself becoming a little hysterical. Why did Adam remain silent? What was his reason? His silence was something beyond her comprehension and it rather frightened her. 'Will all of you please get out!'

The following day, Jody was discharged from Palmerston North's Public Hospital. The doctor had informed her that there was nothing seriously wrong with her that a week or more in bed wouldn't heal. However, Jody herself felt as though every one of her ribs were either cracked or broken and that all her muscles had either been pulled or bruised. She was stiff almost to the point of immobility.

Her uncle and aunt arrived late that morning to drive her home. Not a word was spoken as Perry Linton drove out of the hospital grounds into Ruahine Street and Jody was thankful for that. Eventually they would have to talk, of course — but later.

She sighed and sat looking out of the car window as they approached the Square, the centre of the city. She had never really bothered to study what had been her surroundings and her whole life ever since she could remember. To her, her home town had merely been something she had often referred to as a 'lifeless hole' — 'a dump' from which she

was longing to escape. But now, because it looked as though she might have to leave it in the not too distant future, she looked at the city through new eyes.

Palmerston North, with its magnificent backdrop of three mountainous ranges, the Rimutakas, Tararuas and Ruahines; its seventeen-acre Square, its esplanade of gardens and blossom trees, lake and river, was often said to be the prettiest inland city in New Zealand.

Today, because it was such a fine day, the blue ranges were outlined sharply against a softer blue of the sky. They looked almost close enough to touch. The Square, where during the week many of the people working in town would sit, or lie in the sun to eat their lunches, was today quiet and tranquil. Fountains played and golfish swam and birds, thousands of them, sang amongst the spreading branches of the trees. There were various kinds of trees, cherry blossoms, kowhai and rata trees, palm trees and silver birches, and there were also great stretches of smooth, rolling green lawns. Everything looked so green.

The shops surrounding the Square appeared to her to be as closed and empty as she felt. Sunday! How she loathed Sundays. So lifeless. So dead. With an oppressive shiver, she sat back in her seat.

For the remainder of that week Jody remained in bed. She asked to see the evening papers and was surprised to find that there had been no big write-up about the accident, only a few paragraphs on some insignificant page in the middle of the paper. What surprised her even more was the fact that the only names mentioned were hers and Brent's. Her uncle's name wasn't there at all. And there was absolutely no hint that it had been anything other than the unfortunate accident it was. Of course she had expected her Uncle Perry to have his finger in the pie as he had on the other two

occasions, but this time he had Adam Slade to contend with. She had thought that if he had had any say in the matter the story would have been plastered on the front page. Jody frowned. It was all very strange and puzzling.

On Sunday, she was up and moving about with nearly all the stiffness and aches gone from her limbs. She lay back in a deck chair, which was permanently situated on the patio of the house, and looked through a few of her aunt's magazines. Every now and then, she would pause to look up, out over the vast sprawling lawns which, after some distance, dipped down sharply towards Centennial Lake where ducks and pukeko swam on the water's calm surface or nested amongst the reeds.

Many more houses lined the banks of the lake, beautiful luxurious homes belonging to the more wealthy of the community. Jody's lips curled. Suddenly, she jumped as her aunt appeared on the patio beside her. 'Will you come into the lounge for a minute, please, Jody?'

Silently, she got to her feet and followed her aunt into the lounge. 'Well, this is it,' she thought. 'I've been allowed a week to recover and now it's time to decide just what's going to be done with their wayward niece.'

As she entered the lounge behind her aunt, she caught sight of a big man sitting in a chair next to her uncle. Adam Slade! She stopped dead.

He looked up as she came into the room and got to his feet. She felt his eyes scan her rough attire of jeans and a shapeless sun-top, which reached the top of her thighs and had a large pattern of the sun splashed over the whole of the front and back.

His eyes took in the unkempt and straggly condition of her hair, as it hung lankly about her shoulders and down over her forehead, the ends almost in her eyes. 'What,' he

found himself wondering bitterly, for not the first time, 'on earth did my brother see in her that made him want to marry her?'

'Sit down, Jody,' her uncle said quietly.

She did as she was told, at the same time eyeing Adam sullenly from beneath heavy strands of reddened hair. She might have given an outward appearance of confidence and defiance, but within herself she was feeling perplexed and very unsure of herself and the situation, and even slightly afraid.

'Jody, what your aunt and I have to say to you, and what we have to do, is not going to be at all pleasant for any of us. But as you'll see there is nothing else we can do.'

Jody remained sprawled back in her chair and managed to hang on to her vague expression, although, despite herself, her fingers tightened a fraction on the arm of the chair, as if she sensed a need to brace herself to take what was forthcoming.

'There isn't going to be any court case . . .'

'Thank God for that,' was all Jody could think. She didn't, at once, stop to ask why — the reason behind it.

'The police are going to accept your word that it was an accident, because they have no proof that it was anything else.'

'But it was an accident!' Jody burst out.

'That may be so, but in many cases like this one, where two teenagers are involved, there is always the possibility of them — of one of them — having consumed liquor before the accident.'

Immediately, Jody's eyes moved to Adam's face. His eyes as they met hers were hard and cold.

'You had been drinking before the accident, hadn't you?' Uncle Perry asked.

'Yes, no doubt Mr. Slade has already informed you that I had two drinks, vodka and orange. But I swear they didn't affect my driving in any way. It was the sun — it was so glaring that for a few seconds I couldn't see a thing in front of me. You know yourself how hard it is to see when driving towards the Beach, into the sun.'

Uncle Perry nodded. 'For anyone else that statement would have been quite sufficient, but not for you, not with your reputation.'

'Then why didn't he. . . . Why didn't you tell the police?' Jody cried, turning to Adam, who remained silent. 'I would probably get put away and you'd have your revenge.'

'Because, Jody, among other things, Mr. Slade realized just what sort of effect it would have on Roseann and me and what sort of effect it could have on my position as City Treasurer in this city.'

'How very thoughtful of him,' Jody murmured.

'Not really,' Perry Linton went on. 'As I said, "among other things", and by other things I mean you.'

'Me?'

He nodded and exchanged rather hasty glances with his wife. 'Mr. Slade has come to terms with Roseann and me. He has agreed not to go to the police with the evidence he holds and thus, by not doing so, he has stopped a rather nasty story from getting into the papers — a story which, if it did get to the papers, could be fatal for me in my job.'

Jody made a face as though she couldn't quite credit Adam Slade's generous gesture. 'That's big of him,' she allowed, though scornfully.

'I doubt whether you'll think so, Jody. In return . . .'

'Ah yes, of course, the big catch. What does he want in return?'

'You.'

Jody looked quite blank for a few seconds, and then she exclaimed incredulously: 'Me?'

Uncle Perry nodded.

She laughed, just a little uncertainly. 'But this is ridiculous! In fact it's ludicrous! He just can't have me!' She had sat bolt upright on her chair.

'Oh yes, Jody, he can.' It was Roseann who had spoken. Jody turned to face her. She saw in her eyes the fierce determination and the unconcealed bitterness and dislike that her aunt had been harbouring for her for many years. 'And with my compliments!'

'Roseann!'

'Be quiet, please, Perry! For years we've — you have let this — this little upstart get away with sheer murder. She's jeopardized your future and position in this city and our reputation and position in society. We've put up with all her disgraceful and disgusting goings-on for nearly all her teenage years — and she's not even our own daughter! We shouldn't have to put up with it, and I refuse to any longer. She doesn't worry about you, she wouldn't give you a second thought, so do you think she thanks you for all the times you — and I — have helped her, or tried to help her? No.' She turned to Mr. Slade. 'I for one, Mr. Slade, am only too pleased to hand her over to you. I'm only too pleased to pass this headache on to someone else. I was getting that way that I was at my wits' end.'

Jody stared at her, white as a sheet and as taut and tense as a young deer. 'You wouldn't dare . . .!'

Roseann stared back at her niece and decided to gamble. 'Oh, wouldn't I?' she challenged.

'But my job . . .'

Her aunt laughed. 'That's been taken care of too. It seems that they're conveniently overstaffed at the factory.'

Desperately, Jody turned to her uncle. He always gave in to her and had given her what she wanted. She had always been able to twist him around her little finger. 'Uncle Perry . . .' she began.

But her aunt, now certain that she had the upper hand in the matter and wasn't going to give it up, cut through her pleadings. 'You needn't resort to that caper, my girl, and beg your uncle for help and try to bend him to your will. That won't work any more.'

Ignoring her aunt, Jody kept her eyes fixed compellingly on Perry's face. But he didn't say anything. All he did was gesture with his hands, as if to ask her to understand.

'Uncle Perry, say something!' she cried. 'You can't just hand me over to Adam Slade!'

Uncle Perry gestured again. 'I'm truly sorry, Jody. My job. . . .'

'Your job!' she shrieked, jumping to her feet. 'But it's my *life*!' Perry didn't look up. 'What do you want me for?' she asked Adam dully.

He stood up — probably so that he could look down on her, Jody thought.

'To work on my farm.'

'To work on your farm?' she interrupted. 'But I can't cook or sew or — or anything! Roseann will tell you. I'm hopeless at domestic chores.'

'You'll soon learn,' he cut in coldly. 'However, it wasn't domestic chores I had in mind. Now that Brent is dead and that the lambing season is almost over, I'll need help with docking. You'll probably prove to be more of a hindrance than a help, but that, too, will soon be remedied. I believe they call girls who work on farms land girls. Well, that's exactly what you're going to become, a land girl. I'm going to see to it that you work from the minute you get up at

daybreak to the minute you drop into bed at night. By the time I've finished with you, you'll know the meaning of work — you'll know the meaning of sheer exhaustion. You won't have any time on your hands for thinking about yourself, or ways to destruct and destroy. Perhaps I'll be doing you a good turn in the long run, of showing you another and better way to live, but you won't enjoy learning it.'

'Are you, by any chance, being your brother's judge and jury and sentencing me to a term of hard labour?'

Adam smiled, fleetingly, unpleasantly. 'Perhaps I am.'

'You can't make me go with you — you can't force me!'

'I wouldn't like to count on that, if I were you.'

'And what if I wouldn't work? You couldn't make me do that either.'

'There are ways and means, Miss Linton. I'm neither a patient nor a tolerant man, and neither am I a kind one. I'm sure you'd soon comply after receiving ten of the best across your backside with a good hard leather belt, plus spending a few days on a diet of bread and water.'

Jody laughed scornfully. 'Yes, you're just the uncivilized sort who would resort to treat a woman in that barbaric fashion!'

'Not a woman, Miss Linton, but a child, yes. And you're a child who hasn't, but should have, been introduced to a good belt many times before now.'

Roseann stood up. A small delighted smile was fixed on her lips. Her niece brought down to size — this was what she had lived to see! 'I'll go and pack her cases,' she told Adam quietly.

'I'm not going!' Jody fumed at her.

But for the first time in her life, Roseann didn't pause or hesitate. She had no more to fear now. Adam Slade would take care of the little hellion, she thought to herself, and

went blithely on her way to begin packing Jody's suitcases with all her belongings, every last one of them.

'I'll never forgive you for this, Uncle Perry!' Jody said venomously. 'Neither of you!'

'I don't think that it's a question of you forgiving them Jody,' Adam said, using her Christian name. 'I think it's more a question of them forgiving you. Are you going to change for the journey?'

'Don't be bloody funny!'

Perry made a halfhearted attempt to reprove her, but Adam waved this aside. 'Let her go. She'll be more than swearing at me by the time I've finished with her.'

Within an hour, Jody's belongings had been packed into two suitcases and shoved into the boot of Adam's Chrysler Valiant and Jody herself had been roughly deposited on the front seat to wait while Adam bade farewell to both Perry and Roseann. Perry had ventured to put his head down to the car window to say good-bye to Jody and had got the back of her head for his pains.

Adam didn't speak to her once on the journey out of Palmerston North, except when she had blurted impulsively: 'I'll run away!'

And he had answered: 'Thanks for the warning.'

She leaned back against the door and pressed her cheek to the cool glass of the window. They were going across the bridge over Raumai River now and she stared down into the depths of the crystal clear water, almost as smooth as glass from its rocky edge to the steep rising face of the cliff opposite, the cliff which they were now on.

They drove on around sharp hair-raising bends and over the mountainous hills in front of them. It was all so indescribably beautiful, so vivid and wild in its tangled green splendour. Most of it was farm land, but then there was a

considerable amount of it nothing but native bush. At times the trees; palms and ferns, kauri and totara, towered on either side of them, almost closing them up in a world of green, cool and lovely.

Jody had been out this way many times before, every-time there had been a school picnic, in fact. It had been wonderful fun, swimming in Raumai River, diving from the steep rugged cliff face, cooking sausages over open fires and playing amongst the bush, native trees so tall the sky could barely be seen.

Despite her predicament, Jody found herself, as she always did, tense for the moment when they would arrive at the highest point on the road. The powerful engine of the car exerted its full power and slowed to almost a stop as it rounded the bend in the road. Then immediately below them, a sheer drop, they could see the Pohangina Valley, part of the Manawatu.

'Can we stop, please?' she asked impulsively, and then straight away regretted her impulse, for Adam shot her an inquiring glance. 'Don't worry, I'm not planning to fling myself over the edge,' she said scathingly.

He stopped. 'I wasn't worried. Your type just don't do the world a favour, because the charitable thought would never enter your head.'

She got out of the car and slammed the door and went over to stand at the edge of the road. The air was fresh and sweet with the scent of wild flowers and damp undergrowth growing at the side of the road. Below, the valley spread wide and green, with the Raumai River twisting and curving its way like a clear silver ribbon.

Suddenly she heard a step behind her and for a horrifying second a picture rose to her mind so terrifyingly real that she swung around with her hands held as if to protect

herself, her eyes wide with terror.

Adam stood there for a few seconds, his eyes blazing with an emotion which was alarming in its intensity. He gave a brief, harsh laugh. 'Yes, it was a thought, wasn't it, Jody? One push and you could so easily be over the edge, seeing there's no fencing of any sort and there would be no one to care. It would be too easy, and you're not going to get out of it as easy as that.'

'You're — you're mad!' Jody managed rather unsteadily, her hands falling to rest clammily against the thigh of her jeans.

'Just obsessed. Obsessed with getting my revenge, just as you were with getting yours.'

CHAPTER THREE

'RIVERVIEW' was the word painted on the letterbox at the long white gate. It was easy to see how the farm had come by its name. In fact, from the view seen from the veranda of the house, it could have been called any number of names, 'Mountainview, or 'Valleyview' and they would have all been appropriate.

The house itself was situated quite some distance back from the road, up on a high hill, wide and white, with a wide veranda overlooking the rolling green lawns bordered by a garden harbouring many kinds of trees and shrubs which were all well taken care of by Adam's aunt, Bess Slade.

Jody stood at the foot of the veranda steps, shivering slightly in the afternoon sun. She had met Bess Slade only once before, during that afternoon before the accident, when she had gloatingly told Adam that Brent wanted to marry her. Even then Bess Slade didn't bother to conceal the dislike she felt for her, but at the time Jody didn't give a second thought to the woman or her particular likes or dislikes. Now, however, it seemed that she was going to have to live with this woman's enmity and resentment of her.

Both her own uncle and aunt, who had acted as her mother and father ever since the death of her own parents, had just, over an hour ago, disowned her and had handed her over to the care of Adam Slade who hated her and blamed her for his young brother's death. It was only just beginning to dawn on her just how friendless she really was, with no one in the world who cared what happened to her, whether

she lived or died. In fact there were many who thought the world would be a much better place if she wasn't in it. Adam Slade had said as much.

Adam joined her at the steps, carrying her two suitcases, 'Come on,' he said curtly. 'We'll have a late lunch and then you can unpack. You'd better make the most of this afternoon, for it'll be the last bit of freedom you'll have for a while.'

And it was. The next morning Jody was awakened at six o'clock by Bess Slade noisily rising the venetian blinds and drawing back the drapes in her bedroom.

She turned over and yawned, feeling a spasm of extreme annoyance shoot through her. 'What time is it? The sun hasn't fully risen yet.'

'It won't be long now. It's six o'clock,' Bess answered briefly. 'Come on, get up and get dressed. Breakfast will be on the table in about five minutes.'

'Six o'clock!' Jody shrieked, her annoyance growing. She hated being woken up at any hour of the morning and at six o'clock in the morning she was never awake, much less up and dressed. She rolled back over on to her side to go back to sleep, mumbling: 'You've got to be kidding. I never get up at six o'clock in the morning for anybody.'

'I'm warning you, if you don't get up right this minute, Adam . . .'

'Oh, get lost, will you, and you can tell Adam from me that he can go jump in the horse trough!'

Bess Slade marched purposefully towards the door and shouted down the hall to Adam, then put her head back inside the room. 'If you're not down in the kitchen in five seconds flat, Adam's coming up here to make sure you make it before the next five.'

Jody laughed lazily. 'Oh yes?'

Bess laughed too, the same kind of laugh, and that, together with the sound of heavy footsteps in the hall, suddenly told Jody that she wasn't kidding. Throwing back the bedcovers, she took a flying leap out of bed on to the floor and threw herself against the bedroom door so that it shut with a resounding slam. She stood leaning against it for a few minutes fighting the heavy giddiness caused by her sudden action. Then, making sure that Adam hadn't advanced any farther, she dragged on her jeans and sweater with groggy movements and made her way slowly towards the kitchen.

'Had a wash?' Adam asked briefly.

'No! I never wash,' she added, deliberately being difficult and also wanting to shock him. However, she failed there.

'So I've noticed, but as you're probably already aware, there are going to be a lot of changes made in the life of Jody Linton, the first being rising not later than six each morning, and the second a wash before breakfast.'

'Or else?'

'No breakfast.'

She sniffed, rubbing her forefinger under her nose, and looked disparagingly at the eggs which Bess was skilfully turning over in the electric frypan. 'Well, I wasn't really hungry anyhow . . .'

'Or lunch or dinner. And if you still haven't had a wash before bedtime, it will be you who'll be getting a ducking in the horse trough,' he informed her mildly, taking the pack of cigarettes and matches which she had withdrawn from the back pocket of her jeans from her hands and opening the door to the coal range, threw them in.

'Hey . . . !' she protested.

'Another change.'

'You can't do that!'

'I've already done it.'

'Oh, come on, this is getting beyond a joke.'

'Believe me, Jody, this is no joke.' Adam's dark eyes held hers, and for the first time in her life she felt afraid. Really afraid. Her uncle and aunt, Detective Morgan, the magistrate and people who had to bear the brunt of her escapades had never possessed the power to make her quake in her shoes and her heart turn over with fear from just a mere look, like Adam had. But she wasn't going to let him see that she was afraid of him. If he knew, or even suspected, then there would be no stopping his power over her. So, shrugging insolently, she went off to the bathroom to wash.

Throughout that day, Adam proceeded to show her just how much of a joke he considered the whole situation. She had never ridden a horse before in her life, much less saddled one, and the horse that Adam had chosen for her, a young restless mare called Tina, appearing by no means small, scared her stiff.

'I've never ridden before,' she told him sullenly.

'You'll learn. Come and watch how I saddle her, and watch carefully, for you'll be doing it yourself tomorrow.' He finished saddling the young mare who, obviously resenting being hampered by such a thing, kept moving restlessly, swishing her mane and tail every few seconds.

'Haven't you got another? I don't like the look of her.'

Adam gave a short mirthless laugh. 'The feeling is probably mutual. Come over here. I'll give you a leg up — or better still, see if you can mount her yourself. Take hold of the reins like this, grasp hold of the front of the saddle with your left hand, your left foot in the stirrup. Take the back of the saddle with your right hand. Remember, your back towards the horse's face — not so far over, she'll prob-

ably turn around and bite your backside!’

Which, in that instant, was exactly what she did. It was fright more than pain which caused Jody to let out a fierce yell, drop the reins and make a dash away from the horse. Only her foot, not quite free from the stirrup, thwarted her in mid-stride and she fell, crashing face down into the dust. The mare tossed her head and giving what sounded like a disdainful snort, trotted away. Jody, angry and humiliated, scrambled to her feet.

‘Well, come on, what are you standing there for? Give it another try!’ Adam rapped impatiently.

Jody turned on him, furious. ‘Like fun! I wouldn’t mount that — that animal if you paid me!’ In a final obstinate gesture, she whipped her hands across the seat of her pants, then strode past him in the direction of the house, but was thwarted again, this time by Adam. His hand shot out and caught her wrist and jerked her back over to the mare standing at the fence. ‘I’m not paying you — I’m telling you. Now get on!’

‘No!’ She stood facing him challengingly, fully prepared to do battle with him rather than make another endeavour to mount Tina.

In one swift movement, Adam grasped her by the waist and swung her up into the saddle. ‘And stay on!’

Frantically, she grabbed the reins and hung on to them and the front of the saddle like grim death. Gritting her teeth, she looked up and glared at Adam’s retreating back. She longed to yell and scream at him, tell him what she thought of him, but she knew that it would make no difference to him. He couldn’t care less what she thought of him. So she would gain nothing in the long run, except perhaps a sore throat and loss of breath. So together they rode the track to the back of the farm in almost complete silence.

Riverview was a beautiful farm — rolling green hills, some much higher than others, mountainous in fact, steep gullies and cascading waterfalls. There were many clumps of trees and through one of these Jody caught a glimpse of a wide flowing stretch of water.

‘Extends out from Raumai River,’ Adam told her briefly when she asked whether it belonged to him. ‘It marks the boundary line between Barries’ farm and mine.’

Jody’s blood chilled at the mention of the Barries and the emphasis he had put on the name. She sat in silence after that and spoke only when spoken to, which was very rarely.

From some of the higher points of the farm, they could see the clear flowing Raumai River below them and the dense greenness of the native bush which made up the Totara Reserve. It was indeed a prosperous farm — not isolated altogether from civilization in that Palmerston North was only twenty-five miles away — and incredibly beautiful under a blue sky and hot spring sun. But Jody looked not for beauty but for a means of escape, and the sooner she found it the sooner she would be free from being dictated to and dominated by this man who so openly despised her.

It was docking season. It had come early this year. Young lambs were running and scampering over the hills as carefree as the wind and without a worry in the world.

‘I wonder what it would be like to be a lamb,’ Jody found herself thinking, watching Adam, aided by his two sheepdogs, Nig and Lad, rounding up the lambs and sheep and moving them into one of the two huge pens which, for this purpose, had been erected on the flatter part of the land.

They hadn’t worked for more than a few hours before

Jody felt just about ready to drop with fatigue. Her back and arms ached, her throat was parched and her shins sore and bruised. She had to catch each and every one of those lambs as they darted this way and that within the confines of the pen, trying desperately to escape from being picked up and held by their four frisky, madly kicking legs while Adam slipped the tiny rubber rings on to their tails and earmarked their right ears.

She had lost track of the times she had been butted by the other ewes and had had her shins kicked and her feet trodden on! *And* the number of unsuccessful efforts at catching a frisky young lamb, who, being stronger than she had estimated, had kicked and butted until in the end she had been forced to drop it and make another attempt.

As if that wasn't bad enough, Adam had to add to the situation by firing instructions at her, one after the other in rapid succession, followed by impatient bellows when she had failed to do exactly what he had wanted.

'For Pete's sake, hold on to the damn thing and don't let it go!' he had shouted at her, when one lamb, bigger and heavier than any of the others, had managed to wriggle free from her grip several times.

'I'm trying to!'

'Then try harder!' he roared.

It was then that Jody gave up. 'Oh, go to hell!' she shouted at him. 'If you can do better, then damn well do it!' She strode to the fence and leapt over it.

To her amazement, Adam shrugged and followed her example. 'Okay. We can leave the rest until after lunch.'

He picked up his discarded shirt and put it on over his thick black bush-singlet and began rolling a cigarette. After he had lit it, he pulled two lunch packs from his saddle bag and threw her one. He then sat down, some distance

away from her, with his back up against an old log. He made no conversation whatsoever, so Jody hungrily ate her sandwiches and sat silently watching the lambs still to be docked — another great pen of them. They looked so white and soft and cuddly, but did she know otherwise now! Their wool wasn't as soft as it looked and their bones were hard and many. They weren't in the least bit clean and they smelt awful.

Suddenly she felt she just couldn't face another — how many hours — doing what she had been doing all during that morning.

‘Even working in that paper bag factory is more preferable than this,’ she told herself. Then she thought of the noise, the monotonous work from eight until four-thirty, with no change or variety, and knew that she would loathe to go back there. At least now she was free from the grey, uninteresting, dreary confines of those four huge tin walls. She liked to be free! She had to be free!

‘Want a drink?’ Adam's voice interrupted her thoughts. She looked up with a start to find him holding up a flask of what she presumed was coffee or tea. She nodded and getting to her feet she crossed to his side and took the flask from him. Pouring herself a drink, she asked casually: ‘How long do you plan on keeping me here?’

He lifted his shoulders. ‘As long as it suits me.’

‘I want to know now. I couldn't stand being here for very long. I'd go crackers!’

He didn't reply.

‘Look, I'm only nineteen. I can't afford to waste the best years of my life. . .’

‘Brent was just twenty-one,’ Adam interrupted, his voice hard. ‘Now he's dead. The best years of his life, a much more worthwhile life than yours, not even lived!’ He got to

his feet and capping the empty flask, put it back into his saddlebag.

'I'll do everything I can to escape!' she cried, panic beginning to seep into her tones.

He merely shrugged. 'I shouldn't bother. You won't get far.'

'You can't keep me here — you can't!' She stamped her foot in hopeless frustration.

He didn't answer to this. Instead he motioned her towards the sheep pens. 'Got to get this lot done before sundown.'

She swore at him, telling him to dock them himself. Rebellion showed in her face and in every line of her legs-astride stance.

He sighed tolerantly, sat down and began rolling himself another cigarette. 'Well, it's up to you whether or not we arrive back at the house by sundown, or midnight. Personally, I couldn't care less.'

Again she felt a longing to shout at him, but managed to control it. If she did say anything he would, of course, go on sitting there, rolling that confounded cigarette and not batting an eyelid. She couldn't quite make up her mind which would be the more frustrating, holding her tongue or blasting forth and him just sit there as though not having heard a word.

Jody was still fuming when they rode up to the gates to the stable yards, a little before sundown. She was aching unbearably and felt completely exhausted, drained both physically and emotionally. She watched Adam dismount and open the stable yard gates and motion her to go through them. Then suddenly she was wide awake, her exhaustion and aching body forgotten. In fact her eyes had brightened and her mind began functioning rapidly. Here was a means

of escape right in front of her, and so soon too! Someone had left the gates open between the stable yard and the large smooth stretch of lawn, belonging to the house. It seemed too good to be true, and much too easy.

Swiftly, she turned and looked behind her. Adam was leading his horse into the yard by the reins, pausing only to close the gates behind him. With a quick, sharp kick, she startled her mount into a gallop across the yard towards the lawn and from the lawn on to the metal of the driveway.

'Come on, girl! Come on!' she coaxed tensely, forgetting her fear of the animal but still clinging to both the saddle and reins with all her might.

Above the sound of the horse's hooves pounding down the long curving driveway, Jody could also hear those of Adam's mount behind her. She shot a quick glance over her shoulder and her heart leapt into her throat. He wasn't very far behind. Desperately, she urged Tina on faster, taking no notice of Adam's voice shouting to her: 'Jody! Pull up, Jody, you stupid little fool! You'll get yourself . . .'

Then the rest of his sentence was drowned by the piercing blast of a car horn, followed by a screeching of brakes and the skidding of rubber on a metal surface. Jody was only half aware of being flung from the saddle as the horse reared on to its back hooves. What concerned her most was the sound that kept echoing and re-echoing in her ears — the thud of the car's mudguard striking against her mount and the horse's loud, frightened, pain-filled neigh. It all happened so quickly.

She lay on her back, dazed and winded, blinking up at the whirling trees and sky. Forcing herself to her feet, she stumbled over to where Tina lay on her side on the road, her eyes rolling with pain and bewilderment. She kept lifting her head in an endeavour to get on to her four hooves

once more, but in vain. In the end, after several attempts, she lay back on her side, whinnying softly and remaining still, as if acknowledging defeat.

'Hell, Adam, I'm sorry.' The driver of the car, Jody discovered, was Mr. Barrie. He stood gazing down at the animal. 'But there just wasn't time. Hitting the horse was unavoidable.'

'It wasn't your fault, Jim,' Adam said, straightening from his crouched position beside the horse. He turned to Jody. 'Go on back to the house.'

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'I didn't realize that it was the road until I was actually on to it. There were so many trees blocking the view and everything happened so quickly . . .'

'Go back to the house!' he repeated.

Her gaze faltered before his. Taking one more look at Tina, she turned and walked slowly up to the house.

'I sure hope you know what you're doing where that young rebel is concerned, Adam,' she heard Jim Barrie say.

'Right at this moment, she's the least of my worries.'

It was some time later before Adam entered the house, his expression grim and foreboding.

'How is the horse, Adam?' Bess asked, slipping the cover over the hot teapot.

'Dead.'

'Dead!' A pale-faced Jody jumped to her feet. 'But — but why?'

'She had her leg broken in two places. I had to shoot her.'

'I'm sorry, Adam.' Bess put a hand on his arm. 'She was a good horse, wasn't she?'

'One of the best, and the youngest.' He ran his hand through his thick black hair.

'Sit down and have dinner. You must be hungry.'

'I'm dead tired, I know that.' He gave a halfhearted smile which was gone as quickly as it had come.

Throughout dinner, Jody sat rigidly on the edge of her chair. She toyed with her food, feeling too sick at heart to eat. She could scarcely believe that the horse, haughty and fiery and so full of life and which she had ridden all that day, was now dead and buried.

Like Brent, Tina belonged to Adam and she had killed her. As Roseann had said, everything she touched or came into contact with she seemed to destroy. For perhaps the first time since the accident, she fully comprehended the fact that she was responsible for the death of another human being. It was her fault that Brent, the brother Adam loved, was dead. She had killed him, just as she had killed Tina. She hadn't meant to, but it still remained — she had.

She wanted to say she was sorry, but how could she? Being sorry wasn't going to bring Brent back. Besides, Adam sat there in a private world of his own. He didn't speak to her or even look at her. It was as if, at that moment, she didn't exist as far as he was concerned.

During the nights that followed, Jody found it impossible to sleep. When she did finally doze off, her dreams turned to nightmares and she awoke to find her body bathed in cold perspiration and her heart palpitating madly.

Throughout the days she carried out Adam's instructions without putting up any objection, thinking that the harder she worked the tiredier she would become and the more chance she would have of acquiring a decent night's sleep.

One Sunday, she was sitting on the steps of the veranda, relaxing in the afternoon sun when she heard a car pull up at the top of the driveway. Getting to her feet, she strolled across the veranda. Looping her arm around one of the

wooden posts, she stood watching as Adam emerged from the house and went out to greet his guest. Jody recognized her immediately. Brent had introduced her as Shona Barrie, his closest friend.

Shona had climbed out of the car and was waiting for Adam to reach her, her tall shapely figure dressed in a smart cherry red slack suit and her blonde hair tied back with a matching ribbon. Her face was not a beautiful one and yet the way in which the corners of her mouth always curved upwards and her blue eyes, always alight with gaiety, gave one the impression that she was.

Jody's eyes took on a mocking glint as Shona held out her hands to Adam, a gentle smile on her lips. She could recall Beth's remarks when she had disclosed the news of Brent's proposal: 'Poor Shona, she'll be heartbroken. She and Brent have been constant companions and have grown up together. She adored him. It was always taken for granted that the two of them would get married eventually. And now this! I just can't understand it. I can't understand Brent . . .'

Shona in love with Brent? That would have been the day, too. Surely any fool with only half an eye could see that it was Adam Shona had wanted, not Brent. It might have been Brent at one time, but Shona, at twenty, had suddenly discovered Adam, not as Brent's older brother but as an older, attractive man of the world who had done things and gone places, qualities which attracted and fascinated the impressionable Shona. He was suddenly much more interesting than his younger brother who, to her, suddenly appeared younger than he actually was.

Jody looked from the glowing Shona to Adam and noted with a sudden sharp jolt that the lines of grief and strain which had hardened and aged his face during the six weeks

that had past since Brent's death were wiped away. He was apparently very glad to see her. Perhaps he returned her feelings.

The thought crossed Jody's mind and her eyes blinked and widened in surprise. She had never before considered the possibility. But then never before had she thought of Adam in that perspective — a man in love. Yesterday she would have laughed at the mere idea, but today she asked herself why. He was young, only thirty-one, a man and — yes, a very attractive man if one, as Shona had already discovered, was to look at him in that light. And from the way he was looking at Shona, Jody would have said that he was more than capable of acting like a man in love towards her. He had taken her hands in his and gave them a quick squeeze. His eyes swept over her appreciatively. From the way Shona smiled up at him, Jody guessed that he had complimented her on her appearance.

Unconsciously, she found her hand tightening on the wooden post she had linked her arm around. The sun was blazing down from a clear blue sky and the air was filled with aroma of spring flowers, trees and shrubs. The blonde girl, with her arm through Adam's, strolled leisurely across the wide sweep of smooth green lawn, towards the house.

As they drew level with Jody and saw her, their expressions underwent a complete change. Adam's hardened as it always did whenever his gaze rested on her, and Shona, the gaiety gone from her face, was looking at him anxiously. It was clear that she had no time for Jody and in fact felt quite indifferent towards her. It was Adam she was thinking about, Adam whose feelings she was concerned for.

'Come on, Adam, I'm dying to see the new pony. Have you decided on a name for him yet?'

They strolled on past and Jody blamed the sun for her watering eyes and the beauty of the spring day for the tightening of emotion in her throat.

That evening, she pulled out a pair of clean jeans and shirt to change into before dinner, and threw them on her bed. Pulling off her soiled jeans and shirt, she reached for the clean ones and then, for some inexplicable reason, she hesitated. Very deliberately, she bundled the clean clothes back into her drawer and withdrew from her wardrobe a dress. She had never worn a dress all the time she had been at Riverview, but it wasn't because she didn't have many. She had more clothes, good clothes, than most girls had at her age. The dress she chose was simply styled and made of a moss green silk. She also took out a pair of bone-coloured shoes which felt light and feminine after the heavy boots and shoes she had become so used to wearing. Before dressing in her new attire, she bathed and washed her hair, which had now lost its coppery red toning and was back to its own natural gold-brown colour. It was shiny too, Jody noted with a thrill as she brushed it dry with long quick strokes.

She received even more of a thrill when at last she was ready to go along to the dining-room, for she scarcely recognized herself in the dressing table mirror — tall and slender and quite lovely, with her hair swept up into a style she had learned to do herself and her skin clearer and healthier than it had ever been before, and she knew that this was because she had been unable to lay her hands on cigarettes and alcohol whenever she felt like it.

'Dinner's ready!'

At the sound of Bess's call, Jody suddenly lost all confidence and questioned the wisdom and the reason for her action. She hovered on the brink of uncertainty, wondering

whether she should change back into her customary shirt and jeans.

'Jody!' Bess called again.

'Oh, blow it!' she thought and, with confidence restored, went along to the dining-room.

She had been going to act as if she was still dressed in her usual outfit and sit down at the table without a word or without looking for any reaction. But for some reason, unknown even to herself, her gaze went immediately to Adam. He was standing beside the liquor cabinet, and at his aunt's exclamation of surprise he looked up from his task of pouring drinks and saw her. But for all the effect her new appearance had on him she might just as well have been wearing a potato sack.

Shona, on the other hand, looked quite surprised. She didn't say anything, but her eyes narrowed and darted towards Adam as if asking for some explanation. He saw the suspicion flicker in her eyes — and so did Jody, and her mind began working along devious channels. She felt quite deflated by the reception she received, and hurt too, bitterly so, and although she knew she had no reason to be she was not going to let that trivial fact dissuade her from carrying out what she had in mind.

'Aperitifs? How wonderful! May I have a sherry, please, Adam?' And just in case he was about to refuse, she turned to Bess, saying quickly: 'What's for dinner?'

'Roast chicken,' Bess replied briefly.

'It smells delicious. You are a marvellous cook, Aunt Bess. You must teach me your secrets,' Jody laughed daringly.

'Why should you need to know how to cook when Mrs. Slade is here to do it for you — and Adam?' Shona asked.

'Every woman needs to know how to cook. It would be

too bad for her husband if she didn't.'

'I would have hardly thought you were the domestic type.'

'You'd be surprised if you knew just what type I am, wouldn't she, Adam?' Jody went over to take her drink from Adam's hands. Her eyes on his were sparkling wickedly. 'I'm going to get hauled over the coals tonight,' she thought, feeling dangerously reckless, 'and, brother, am I going to make it worthwhile!'

'Would she? I think what she knows is pretty accurate,' Adam responded coldly.

'What does she know? What have you told her about me? How well I can dance?' She swung around to face Shona. 'Has he told you how well I can dance?'

'Dinner is ready. We'd better have it before it turns cold,' Bess said quickly, noting the distress and uncertainty written in Shona's young face.

'Good idea.' Jody finished her drink and sat down at the table. 'I like farm life,' she went on. 'I hated it at first, didn't I, Adam? But now.... Well, I think I'll have to marry a farmer,' she laughed. 'You're lucky,' you know, Shona, having lived on a farm all your life. It's so beautiful up here with all the valleys and rivers and native bush. Why, you even have your own private river — you and Adam. I guess you swim there an awful lot during the hotter months. It's a beautiful spot, especially at night. Isn't it, Adam? With the moon shining through the trees, turning everything a silvery-white.' Her voice became rather dreamy. 'It was rather eerie, too. I felt quite spooked. Do you remember?' she laughed across at Adam. She shivered slightly. That look was in his eyes, that look which had the power to frighten her. He knew, as well as she did, what was going through Shona's mind at what she had just said and

that it was an impression she had deliberately set out to create.

She recalled the night she had gone out for a ride. She had been unable to sleep, so, saddling up one of the horses, she had ridden down to the river and back. Adam had heard her leave and had waited up until she arrived back. She also remembered laughingly telling him that she didn't know which had spooked her most, the eerie moonlit river or him, stepping out from the shadows of the veranda to meet her.

Jody saw the warning in his eyes, but was unable to help herself. 'How did you like Jupiter?' she asked Shona, when they were seated in the lounge, drinking coffee. Her mind had worked quickly. She had a suspicion that Adam had bought the young pony for the express purpose of presenting him to Shona. He had probably already told her that it was hers, but she wondered if she knew that Adam had approved of the name she herself had chosen. He had not agreed to name him that, but what did that matter?

'Jupiter?' Shona looked puzzled.

Jody's eyebrows rose. 'Hmmm, the new pony. I thought Adam was going to show him to you.'

'Oh — oh yes, yes, he did,' Shona said faintly.

'Isn't he a beauty?'

'Yes — yes, he is. I didn't think he'd been named yet.'

So Adam had told her that the pony was still unnamed! Perhaps he had even suggested that she choose a name for him. This was going to be even better than she had thought. 'Oh yes, Adam liked the name I chose for him. Perhaps he may even let me keep him . . .'

'Excuse — excuse me, please,' Shona interrupted, getting to her feet and, placing her coffee cup none too steadily on

the coffee table, she rushed out of the room — but not before Jody glimpsed at tears trembling on her lashes.

Adam was on his feet instantly and followed her, without a glance in Jody's direction.

'Well?' Bess said at last. 'Are you satisfied?'

'Satisfied?'

'Oh, don't play the innocent with me, Jody. What I can't understand is why you did it. Why?'

'She's a stupid, insipid little nincompoop — and a snob. Fancy believing all that guff! Her type infuriate me.' Jody gestured impatiently with her hands, refusing to meet Bess's eyes.

'Well, it's going to prove to be a pretty poor show if you intend to go through life trying to hurt other people just because they infuriate you. Is that the only reason?'

'No!' Jody jumped to her feet. 'I want to get away from here, and he won't let me go. He's got no right to keep me here like this. I know I caused his brother's death, but keeping me prisoner here isn't going to bring him back. Look, I want to get out. If he won't let me go then I'll make him sorry he ever brought me here. I'll make him sorrier than he's ever been in his life!'

'You've already done that,' Bess reminded her calmly.

For once, Jody floundered, unable to find an answer to that terrible truth.

'You're a destructive person, Jody,' Bess went on. 'Also self-destructive, selfish and wilful.'

Jody laughed wildly. 'I know, I know. I've been told all that before. A daughter of Satan, Roseann used to call me. And perhaps she's right. My parents were never any good. She didn't really want to take me in when they died. She used to make out that it was Uncle Perry's reputation and social position she was so concerned about, but I knew better.

If her goings-on ever leaked out they'd make bigger headlines in the paper than I ever did. That was the reason she wanted to be rid of me, because she knew that if I ever opened my mouth then it would be the end of playing Lord and Lady Linton for them, and she didn't want that to happen. As for Uncle Perry — poor Uncle Perry sought refuge in a little world of his own. He used to find it too, I think, but only for a little while.'

There was silence for a time. Jody stood peeling an orange which she had taken from a bowl resting on top of a glass cabinet.

'So that's it,' Bess said at last. 'It's your pride and vanity that's hurt. It's not because you can't stand being kept here — in fact, I think what you said to Shona earlier is true. You do like the country life. It's because seeing how lovely Shona looked today reminded you that you, too, were a girl. You too, wanted to be admired and complimented, like Adam admired and complimented Shona.'

'That's not true!' Jody denied fiercely. 'I despise Adam. I'd loathe him to compliment me!'

'You've never had much attention paid to you, have you, Jody? You wanted it and you needed it, and the only way in which you could be sure of getting it was to behave as you did tonight, and as you have on, no doubt, countless occasions before.'

'It's not true!' Jody stormed. 'It's not! I hate him — you. I hate you all!' She flung the half-peeled orange back into the bowl and rushed to the door, as Shona had done, through the dining-room and out on to the veranda, straight into Adam. He caught her by the arm and half dragged and half hauled her back into the lounge.

'Let me go!' she panted furiously.

He obliged by thrusting her into the chair she had not

long before vacated.

'Well, that was quite an exhibition!' he grated, his eyes blazing, his face white with anger. 'But believe me it's going to be your last, and before I'm through, you'll wish there'd never been a first. Unfortunately for you, perhaps, Shona senses the ludicrousness of the picture you were trying to conjure up for her.'

Jody laughed sneeringly, getting to her feet again. 'Not too sure of you, is she?' She saw him whiten still further.

'She's too young to realize just what antics a type like you would get up to.'

'Then you'll have to set her straight, won't you? Still, if she loves you she wouldn't have taken what I said so much to heart. She would have trusted you and not doubted you. She wouldn't have believed the girl who killed your brother.' The look on his face was beginning to frighten her, but still she plunged on recklessly. 'Let me go free. Let me go! If you don't I'll do something far worse than I did tonight . . .'

'Adam!' Bess's voice cut in sharply. 'She's lying — trying to cover up the true reason she behaved the way she did tonight.'

'I'm not, Mrs. Slade!' said Jody vehemently, though in her defiant eyes, Mrs. Slade saw a flicker of pleading.

'Send her to bed, Adam.'

Wearily, Adam jerked his head towards the door.

For a few seconds Jody stood where she was, her lips set mutinously and her hands clenched. A minute after she had left the room they heard the shattering sound of the sherry decanter being dashed to the floor, followed by the loud slamming of the dining-room door. Bess Slade sighed, recognizing the action as one directed against her for what she was about to discuss with Adam.

CHAPTER FOUR

ON THE day before the shearing gang was due to arrive at Riverview, Bess was suddenly taken ill with some kind of 'tummy bug', as the doctor described it, and was ordered to remain in bed for a few days.

Jody was naturally sympathetic, but her sympathy soon turned to outrage when Adam calmly informed her that she would have to take over managing the household and doing all the necessary domestic chores until Bess was well again.

'You must be out of your mind!' she cried. 'I'll probably break everything I lay my hands on!'

'Not probably — definitely,' Adam interrupted dryly.

'And scorch the ironing. Anyway, if I don't do that the clothes will end up looking worse than they do now, just freshly washed. And besides, I can't cook!' she ended triumphantly.

'Then you've got a lot to learn in a short time. I'm expecting four shearers before dinner time tomorrow and I'll expect you to have the house cleaned and tidied, the ironing done, the shearers' quarters completely spring-cleaned and the four beds made, the hens fed, the stables cleaned — you didn't do them today—'

'I didn't have time!' Jody stormed.

'Then you'll have to make time tomorrow. They can't be let go another day—and enough food prepared and cooked for seven dinners tomorrow night. Oh, and the following day you'll need to be up at five. Breakfast,' he explained, seeing bewilderment add to her outraged expression.

'You're—you're crazy! I refuse!' she ended flatly.

Adam sighed. 'Will I have to stand over you all day tomorrow, cracking the whip?'

'But — but . . .' she floundered, though not through loss of words. She had enough to say, but the trouble was it all wanted to be said at once.

'Go to bed.' He pointed towards the door, terminating the discussion, obviously tired of the subject. He picked up the evening newspaper.

'What, now? It's only nine-thirty.'

'I know.' She couldn't see his face for the newspaper. 'You've got to be up by five-thirty to cook my breakfast. Only one tomorrow. You have the opportunity to break in slowly.'

That was going just too far. 'I'm damned if I will!'

Adam lowered the newspaper and looked at her calmly. 'I'll make sure that you will,' he promised, and she knew that this was one promise he would definitely keep.

It was six-thirty the following evening when Jody had completed making the last bed and adding the finishing touches to the newly cleaned shearers' quarters. Wiping the back of her wrist over her forehead and then across the tip of her nose, she planted her hands on her hips and stood back to survey her work critically.

'Well, well,' a deep voice drawled behind her, causing her to swing around. 'Do we get you as an extra?'

The young man, no doubt one of the shearers, was standing in the doorway, his thumbs tucked into the belt of his jeans, and was slowly looking her up and down with eyes that sparkled with cheek and appreciation. He was big-built, and handsome in a rugged kind of way, with tanned skin and unruly hair springing from the front of his hat,

which was pushed on to the back of his head.

Jody grinned. "Fraid not. I've just cleaned up, and made the beds. I hope everything is satisfactory."

'If it's not, I'll let you know — personally.'

She laughed. 'You do that!'

'Hey, where are you going?' he protested as she made to leave.

'Back to the house. I've got work to do, even if you haven't.'

'Can't it wait?'

'Uh-huh,' she shook her head.

'Not even for a minute?'

'Nope,' she grinned, walking on again.

'See you at dinner, then?' he called after her.

'Yes, see you then,' she threw over her shoulder.

A few seconds later she heard the sound of running footsteps pounding up behind her.

'Hey,' he panted, 'what's your name?'

'Jody.'

'Jody,' he repeated, and nodded. He whipped off his hat and took her hand. 'Pleased to know you, Jody. See you at dinner.'

Jody laughed, 'See you at dinner.' Dinner! She clamped a hand to her head, her eyes widening in dismay. 'Oh, my gosh!' she wailed. 'Oh, heck!'

She made a frantic dash in the direction of the house and burst into the kitchen to be greeted by an odour which immediately told her that there was going to be no roast dinner that night.

'Jody! Jody!' Bess's voice hailed from her bedroom at the other end of the house.

'Yes?' Jody yelled as she whipped open the oven door. Screwing up her eyes and trying not to breathe, she with-

drew what was left of the roast, potatoes and pumpkin which she had gone to great lengths to prepare after having so painstakingly followed Bess's instructions.

'Can I smell something burning?' Bess called.

Jody stared down at the pan of what looked like lumps of black charcoal and nodded dismally. Oh, what a day!

Her first mishap had occurred at breakfast that morning when she had dropped a tin of hot fat on to the floor. It had taken her the best part of an hour to get every bit of it cleaned off the walls, linoleum and floor rug. That had happened because she had still felt half asleep. And no wonder, at five-thirty. What a ridiculous hour to have to get up!

But as the day grew older her defiance, fight and energy grew considerably less. She had already received a look of reproach from Aunt Bess who had taken the shock of being told that her favourite ornament, a delicate china horse, had been smashed to smithereens, without uttering a word. However, Jody winced when she imagined the entirely opposite reaction she was going to get when Adam learned about the hole she had burned, with a too hot iron, into the back of one of his best white nylon shirts. She very much doubted that he would be as lenient or tolerant as his aunt.

And there was the Pavlova. Even Bess didn't know about that disaster. Anyway, how was she to know that to make a successful Pavlova it first took many failures and tons of practice? She soon learned this for herself though, when, what was supposed to be a light and white, fluffy-looking meringue concoction turned out to be a shrunken brown lump, closely resembling a rock. It had made a pathetic picture, sitting in the middle of the electric frypan. 'The Rock' was now safely tucked away in the rubbish bag, an

utter waste of four egg whites. What on earth was she going to do with the yolks? She sighed. And now this!

Adam came in just then. He saw her standing amid a swirl of grey smoke, familiarly clad in jeans and T-shirt, and her hair pulled back into a ponytail. In her hands she clutched a pan, into which she was staring with a woebegone expression on her face. She looked almost ready to howl.

'I've burned the dinner,' she told him in a voice that matched her expression, as he began opening windows and closing the doors that led to other parts of the house.

'So I've gathered.' He came over and inspected the shrunken, unrecognizable items of food and controlled an impatient sigh. 'You'd better put the pan down on the bench before you drop it.'

'Well,' he went on, 'you may as well get it over and done with. What else have you dropped, broken, burned or just generally puckerood since your first mishap this morning?'

She told him, and watched his expression change from one of tolerance to one of tight-lipped anger. She got as far as the burned shirt and chickened out at the Paylova.

'Good heavens, girl can't you do anything?' he exploded at last. 'You destroy everything you lay your hands on, not just things, but people and animals as well. Just what is it with you?'

All at once the contriteness she was feeling evaporated and a strong indignation took its place. 'You speak as if I do it on purpose!' she flared. The injustice of his remarks hurt her more than she was going to admit. However, she had to admit that there had been a time when she couldn't have cared less how low his opinion of her was.

'Do I? Well, only you would know whether you do or not. I can merely assume,' he grated at her.

'Then all I can say is that your assumptions are up the

pole completely and that all this is your fault!

'My fault!'

'Yes! If you hadn't given me so much to do I might have been able to do some things properly and without any accidents occurring at all.'

'That's a very big "might",' he said darkly. 'And too much to do? Shona would have coped with all you had to do today, and more, without there being any sign of a flap. And there would have been none of this.' He waved a hand at the burnt roast.

'Well, I'm not Shona!' Jody snapped. 'If she rates so high in your estimation, then you'd better get her over here tonight to cook dinner for your four blasted shearers, and perhaps even stay until Mrs. Slade is back on her feet. I'm sure she'd just love the idea — and not only from the domestic angle!' She slammed out of the kitchen, ignoring his furious, 'Jody! Come back here!'

Reaching her bedroom, she slammed the door behind her and flung herself across her bed. She clenched her fists. She wouldn't cry. She just wouldn't! Suddenly, she jerked upright as her bedroom door was kicked open. Never had she imagined that Adam would do this. She stared at him standing in the doorway, his big form almost blocking it entirely. 'Get out of my room!' she ordered huskily.

'I'm not in it,' he told her, 'but I will be if you don't get back down to the kitchen immediately.'

Dumbly she shook her head and shrank back as he took a step towards her. 'You lay one hand on me and I'll have you up for assault!' she threatened with more bravado than she was actually feeling.

'One hand!' he repeated. 'I'm going to give you a damn good hiding. Before I'm through with you, you young helion, I promise you won't sit down for a week!'

'You wouldn't dare.'

'Oh, wouldn't I?' Adam laughed grimly, then all of a sudden he stopped as something on her dresser near her bed caught his eye. Following his gaze, Jody's own rested on a photograph of Brent, one which he had given to her during their acquaintance.

'Where did you get that?' he demanded harshly.

'Brent gave it to me.'

Adam gave a hard mocking laugh. 'Does keeping a picture of Brent beside your bed help you sleep better?'

She winced and after a length of silence: 'I hate you,' she told him quietly. 'I hate you like I've never hated anyone. In my opinion your brother is better off dead than alive with a brother like you. I don't believe you really cared for him at all. You just wanted someone to help you run your rotten farm!' Now that she had started there was no holding her back. She wanted to hurt him and right then, come hell or high water, she was going to succeed. 'I think Brent was even a little afraid of you and I think you made sure that you saw to it he was, so that you could control him and keep him under your thumb. I think what makes you so angry is the knowledge that Brent loved me and has never loved you, and that . . .' she stopped.

'Go on,' Adam said stonily.

'I think,' she plunged recklessly, 'that before he died, because he loved me and because he knew that in marrying me he would be free of Riverview, those days we had together were the happiest in his entire life.'

Adam didn't say a word. He had paled considerably, but he neither spoke nor moved. He just stood there. And because he didn't react in the way she had anticipated, it frightened her. She had only been stabbing in the dark. Even if it were true why didn't he mock and laugh at her wild

ramblings?

'I'll whip up a salad for dinner,' she said, walking quickly past him, out of the room, telling herself that the twinge she felt was neither pity nor regret. She had hurt him deeply, she must have done, and although she couldn't bring herself to jump for joy over her victory, she certainly wouldn't admit to regretting what she had said. 'It was the truth,' she decided, fiercely jabbing a knife into the heart of the cabbage she was going to shred for a coleslaw salad.

She had forgotten all about the young shearer she had promised to 'see at dinner'. But had she remembered, instead of being so absorbed in the other happenings of that day, and in particular that last clash with Adam, she would have had her dinner out in the kitchen, alone. She didn't feel in the least bit sociable, but as she soon discovered, the young shearer did. His name, she learned, was Roger Davis and he sat on the opposite side of the table, winking at her every time she happened to look up and catch his eye. She frowned at him several times, but he merely grinned at her until, at last, she gave in and smiled back in a rather half-hearted sort of way.

When the others had gone into the lounge for coffee, Jody remained behind with the intention of clearing away the dishes. Roger too decided to remain behind and he came up and put a hand on her arm. 'Want to go for a stroll?' he suggested.

'Can't, sorry. I've got the dishes to do.'

'I'll give you a hand and we can go for a stroll later.'

She sighed to herself and was about to refuse when, at that moment, Adam came back into the dining-room and saw them standing together. His gaze quickly took in Roger's hand on her arm.

'What are you doing out here, Davis? Coffee is being

served in the lounge.'

Jody stepped forward and Roger's hand dropped to his side. 'Roger has offered to help with the dishes. And later,' she added, 'we're going for a walk.'

Adam's eyes narrowed. However, to her surprise he inclined his head, picked up the cigarettes he had left on the table and went back into the lounge.

'Just what is the arrangement between you and the Slade family?' Roger asked, when the dishes had been done and they were taking their stroll in the garden.

'I'm — working for them.'

'It can't be much fun for you. And that guy — if he smiled just once, he'd probably crack his face. Why on earth don't you quit?'

Slowly, a plan began forming in Jody's mind. Why hadn't she thought of it before? If she hadn't have been so wrapped up in herself a little earlier, she might have. But still, she frowned, it was quite a slip-up on her part.

'Actually I'm thinking about it, but it's kind of an arrangement made between him and my folk. I'm more or less forced to remain here.'

'But you don't want to?'

'No.'

'Can't you get away somehow?'

'Believe me, I've tried, but I haven't been very successful. It's doubly hard because I'd been on probation during the past six months and my whereabouts had to be reported to the police every so often. But now I'm off and I want to get away — desperately.'

'Perhaps I could help . . .'

'Oh, could you — would you?' Jody turned to him eagerly, experiencing a thrilling surge of triumph.

'Well, I haven't got a car, but if I can get hold of the truck

I could run you into the city.'

'Oh, that would be terrific! Do you know when you could use it?'

'I'll have to talk Bob around. He owns it. Look, make it the day after tomorrow. It should be okay by then.'

'Friday. What time on Friday?' Jody clasped her hands together.

'Well, I guess that's up to you. When can you manage to get away without being caught?'

She thought for a few seconds. 'Better make it after dinner.'

'Midnight?' Roger laughed.

'Why not? I think it would be about the only time I would be able to get away without being spotted. Is that okay with you?'

'Sure,' Roger agreed.

'Now, Adam is pretty shrewd, so don't make it so obvious that we're friends or else he'll be bound to suspect something's up.'

'Right. Until Friday midnight, we're only casual acquaintances, who wink at each other over the dinner table.'

Jody laughed. 'Thanks, Roger.' Never could she have ever foreseen such an ending to such a disastrous day.

When Friday came around, she was bursting with suppressed excitement. Free! Soon she would be free. She didn't care where she went or what she did, just as long as she got away from this place — far away.

Throughout that day her head was filled with dreams of what she was going to do when she got free. She had been dreaming and planning ever since that night she had met Roger. She was going to go down South, make a new life for herself — away from everything and everyone here. For-

get, if she could, that Adam Slade ever existed. She'd never forget her tragic relationship with Brent, but she knew that a new life must open up for her somewhere. She had to have a break and tonight was going to give it to her.

At dinner, she was a tiny bit perturbed at discovering that Roger was absent from the gang. She didn't dare to ask where he was. 'He must be getting ready for tonight,' she told herself, putting all anxiety out of her mind. Nothing could go wrong tonight. Nothing must go wrong — not now — not after waiting all this time for a means of escape.

Excitement mounted within her as she sat waiting in the darkness of her bedroom. She was dressed in slacks and sweater and had packed her duffle bag with necessary items of clothing, money and jewellery and other valuable odds and ends that she possessed. She had also smuggled a little food from the kitchen.

At five to twelve she crept over and pushed up the window and climbed over the sill on to the veranda. Her heart was clamouring inside her and thundering noisily in her ears. There was a moon tonight and Jody couldn't quite make up her mind whether that was a blessing or not. The rest of the house was in darkness, so she could only hope and pray that the whole of the household was in bed and that Adam was not sitting, smoking somewhere in the dark as he was often apt to do.

It was only when she was leaning against the side of the car shed, between it and the shearers' quarters, that the loud rapid thudding of her heart quietened and she relaxed. Roger wasn't there yet. 'God, don't let him be long,' she prayed fervently.

After what seemed eternity, she saw a dark shadow move across the opening between the two sheds. Someone was coming towards her.

'Roger!' she whispered tensely. 'Roger, is that you?'

But the voice that answered her certainly wasn't Roger's.

'Naw, sorry, hon, but Roger couldn't make it. Sent me instead.'

For a split second her heart seemed to stop dead with fright. Harry Lawson! The only member of the shearing gang she neither liked nor trusted — and he knew it. She had often caught him watching her furtively when he came in to dinner in the evenings, and the way he looked at her turned her blood to ice. She had always been glad of the presence of the Slades and other members of the gang.

'Where — where is Roger?' she snapped, determined not to betray the fact that she was shivering nervously.

'Like I told you, he couldn't make it. He asked me to take you into the city, so here I am. Always glad to do a lady a favour — for a price.'

Suddenly he loomed up close to her — too close, and she felt a scream forming in her throat. 'Don't you touch me, Harry Lawson, or else I'll scream the place down,' she whispered harshly, taking a step back from him, her hands flat against the shed wall behind her.

He merely laughed, and taking hold of her shoulders, pinned her back against the wall. 'No, you won't, honey. It wouldn't look too good for you, and I know the Slades will be more than willing to believe my side of the story rather than yours. I know all about you and the boy Slade — read about it in the papers. Heard a lot about it, too. You sure get around, kid,' he sneered. 'Besides, I rather thought you'd do anything to get away from here.'

'I will. I'll pay you anything. I've got a bit of money...'

'You're no little innocent. You know it's not money I'm after. I've had my eye on you for some time. You're quite something.'

She felt his breath hot on her face and frantically she began to struggle. 'No! No, you brute! Let go of me! I can get into Palmerston without your help.'

Harry Lawson laughed unpleasantly. 'You've got it all wrong, kid. The only place you'll be going is back to Adam Slade — and I'll be escorting you personally, with a nice little tale to tell which I'm sure he'll find no difficulty in believing.'

'You're a pig! A filthy. . . .'

'Your yapping will get you nowhere, so quit wasting time,' he said against her mouth.

She felt the back of her head being pressed hard against the shed wall and with the pressure of his mouth on hers, she was unable to move her head at all. Desperately she wriggled and kicked him with her feet, but he was much too big and much too strong for her.

In the end she went slack against the wall. The fight drained from her as black waves clouded her brain until she thought she was going to pass out. Then quite suddenly she was free of the weight pressing her back, and she could breathe again, and see the moon and stars through the gap between two buildings.

'Pack your gear and clear out! Tonight! Right now!'

Adam! Relief and gladness swept over her. She would never have believed that she could have been made so happy at the sound of his voice.

'Say, that's hardly fair, is it?' Lawson protested. 'What's the harm in kissing a pretty girl if she's willing?'

'Don't tell me that a girl meets a man out here at this time of night for a mere kiss!' Adam snarled.

'Well, I guess not, but heavens above, you can't blame a guy. . . .'

'Go on, get going, or do you need a helping boot?'

'Okay, okay, if that's the way you want it, I'll go.' Lawson turned to Jody, who was standing, staring at him bewilderedly, unable to take in or grasp what was happening. 'S'long, Jody. Might see you around, eh? Too bad about our little date tonight, but that's the way the cookie crumbles.'

She was aware of being taken by the arm and all but dragged back to the house. Trying to pull herself together, she pleaded with Adam: 'Why was he saying that? Why did he imply that I'd arranged to meet him there? It's not true, Adam, I swear it isn't!'

But Adam didn't answer. He bundled her up on to the veranda, pushed her into one of the cane chairs and switched on the dull veranda light. 'We'll talk this thing out here so as not to disturb Bess.'

'I swear I didn't arrange to meet Harry Lawson there, Adam. I hate him. He gives me the creeps; the way he looks at me. You've got to believe me!' Jody begged.

'Then what were you doing behind the car shed?' Adam asked harshly.

'Waiting for Roger.'

'Well, isn't that just as bad?'

'No. No, you don't understand. I — Roger — well, I asked Roger if he would give me a ride into the city. I told him I wanted to get away from here. He agreed to help me, so we arranged to meet between the car shed and the shearers' quarters at midnight, Friday, and he was going to take me into Palmerston. Only Harry Lawson turned up instead and said Roger was unable to make it and that he'd sent him instead,' Jody babbled on breathlessly. 'I can't believe that. I can't believe that Roger would send someone like Harry Lawson to take me into the city.'

'He didn't. I sacked Davis and sent him packing Thurs-

day, after dinner.'

'But why?' she cried.

'I sensed that something was going on between you two and whatever it was it had to be stopped. I couldn't afford the time to chase you up every few seconds to see what you were up to, so I paid him and told him to take the week off.'

'Then you think Roger gave Harry Lawson a message for me?'

Adam didn't answer. Instead he regarded her steadily for some time and in a flash she knew what he was thinking. 'You don't believe me, do you? You think I had arranged to meet Harry Lawson instead of Roger, or in place of him.'

'I didn't see any signs of a struggle going on between the two of you.'

'Only because you arrived too late. He was too big and too strong for me. He said if I didn't do as he said then he would tell you that I had crept out to meet him and that if I screamed then it would look worse for me, in your eyes, than it would for him.' Suddenly, without warning, she began to cry. 'I — I couldn't stand it. I couldn't move and I couldn't b — breathe. I — I felt as though I was suff — suffocating. It — it was horrible!' She covered her face with her hands and cried without being able to stop. When eventually she did, she felt a glass being thrust into her hands.

'When you've drunk that, you'd better get straight into bed.'

'Thanks,' she whispered. After taking a few sips she sat staring down at the swirling gold liquid. 'He said,' she told him after a while, 'that I was a girl who'd been around. Everyone thinks that — the guys I've been out with, Roseann and Uncle Perry, the Courts and Mrs. Slade and you — everyone, but it's not true. It's just not true!' She looked

up at him earnestly.

He stared back at her, his eyes as dark and unreadable as ever. He nodded.

'I know I used to look the cheap sort — but I don't now, do I? I mean my hair is back to its natural colour, I don't wear any make-up whatsoever and I'm clean and respectably dressed. Why is it a man will never respect me? Is it because of my reputation?'

Adam studied her silently for several minutes. She was a lovely girl, probably the girl Brent had seen behind all that make-up she wore, and unflattering clothes. Her hair, a golden brown, was tousled, but clean and shiny, framing an oval face. Her wide-spaced hazel eyes were direct in their gaze, never leaving his for a moment. She had a wide, curvy mouth, which when she smiled revealed even white teeth. Yes, she was a lovely girl, with an aloof, indefinable quality about her that would attract men, as would her wild, reckless spirit.

'You are an attractive girl,' he said at last. 'That fact, and perhaps your reputation too, would make a man take advantages he wouldn't normally take with a girl like. . . .'

'Shona?' Jody supplied.

'Yes, Shona if you like.'

She finished her drink and handed him back the glass. She got to her feet. 'In that case I don't really blame you for not believing me. I'm certainly not in Shona's class, am I? According to you, I'm nowhere near it!'

He didn't answer her questions; instead he said: 'Surprisingly enough, I do believe you.'

She gave him a wry smile. 'Thanks.' It was what she wanted, wasn't it? That he believed her? Then why did her heart suddenly feel like a lead weight inside her. She turned to leave him, then hesitated. 'I don't suppose this means

anything to you, but I'm sorry for what I said to you the other night — about Brent. It wasn't true. Not a word of it was true. Whenever Brent and I were together, he would never stop talking about you — his wonderful, never-could-do-wrong big brother. I think that was another reason why I disliked you so much. I think it must have been jealousy, don't you?"

'How could it have been that? You were never in love with him,' Adam's face was inscrutable.

'No, but as your aunt has already informed you on that night I was so catty to Shona, I crave attention and will go to any lengths to get it. Brent didn't love me. It was mere infatuation and deep down I knew this, but wouldn't admit it. He loves me, I told myself, and I couldn't bear the knowledge that his love and attention were being divided between you and me. I wanted it all. I wanted all he could give and give nothing in return — nothing worthwhile, that is. Even he said he would give up Riverview for me, I knew that when the time came to prove himself, he wouldn't — he couldn't. Nevertheless, I wanted to get one back at you for what you said to me that night at the Flamenco and I was determined to use Brent to do it.'

'What did I say?' Adam frowned.

'That I was a bold and brazen hussy who had the morals to go with being one. It wasn't true,' she told him, her head bent and her eyes downcast.

'I'm sorry, Jody,' Adam said at last. 'It seems that I had a big hand in bringing about Brent's death.'

'No.' She shook her head. 'I had a punishment coming to me, but I'm only sorry that others had to get hurt in the process.'

'Do you consider it such a punishment being kept here? You probably did at first, but don't you consider that, by

and large, you've benefited a great deal, personally?'

'Are you trying to say that for me to become a better person, Brent's life had to be forfeited.'

'Jody, Brent's. . . .' he stopped. 'Oh, never mind. You'd better go to bed.'

'What were you going to say?'

'Another time.' He looked down at his watch. 'It's one-fifteen and you'll have to be up early in the morning to give Bess a hand in the kitchen. She's still not fully recovered yet.'

Jody nodded wearily and slung her duffle bag over her shoulder. 'Goodnight, Adam.'

'Goodnight. Oh, and in future, stay away from the shearers.'

CHAPTER FIVE

So that was that. The plans and dreams which she had been so sure were going to materialize had, in the end, all come to nothing. She was right back to where she had started with nothing gained — except perhaps a better understanding between Adam and herself. But how long would that last? Until their next row?

However, she had no time to brood. Adam saw to that. He kept her occupied from the moment she got up in the morning until dinner time in the evening. She cleaned up the shearers' quarters after the shearers had left and also the stables. Taking care of the stables and grooming the horses had become a set chore which was one she privately enjoyed. She had lost her fear of horses and had become quite an accomplished rider, liking nothing better than to go riding as often as she could.

And there were the gardens. Gardening was Bess's particular hobby, but they were large gardens which needed constant weeding and the assortment of shrubs and flowers and native ferns demanded plenty of attention. So gardening became another set chore, but one she wasn't too sure whether she enjoyed to the same extent.

Returning back from the orchards one afternoon, after having spent the full day fruit-picking, she decided to ride down to the River for a quick swim. It was late by the time she arrived back for dinner, the sun was sinking fast on the horizon, and yet she had beaten Adam, who had still not returned.

'I'm worried,' Bess said anxiously.

'What for? He's often late getting back.'

'Yes, I know, but never when he takes the tractor. He knows how I worry when he's on that dangerous contraption, so he always tells me what time to expect him. Today he told me that he'd be back for dinner at six, and it's now gone seven-thirty.'

'Well, he may have been held up doing some job that's taking longer than he had anticipated,' Jody suggested.

Bess shook her head.

'Whereabouts did he go?' asked Jody.

'Out to the back paddock to rescue a steer which had fallen down into a gully. You know how treacherous those hills are out there.'

'And you're thinking about all those tractor accidents you've heard and read about? Look, if it will make you feel any easier, I'll ride out to meet him, but I'm sure you're worrying needlessly.'

Jody saddled up her horse as swiftly as she could, praying that night wouldn't fall too quickly. She didn't believe for a minute that Adam had had an accident, but she didn't relish the thought of riding to the back of the farm in the dark. Following the wide and windy mud track, she rode as fast as she could watching as she went, the imprints of tractor wheels in the mud. When at last she came to the gully she had assumed was the one where the steer had been trapped, she dismounted and ran to the edge of the rugged and steep descent.

She stood stock still for a few seconds. Her limbs lost all their power to move and she went utterly numb at what she saw. The tractor was turned over on its side on the slope of the gully some distance down. She strained her eyes for some sign of Adam, but there was none.

Half climbing and half slithering down the slope, she

made it to the tractor and her worst fears were confirmed. The lower part of Adam's body was trapped beneath the weight of the tractor. However, upon reaching him she saw that he was alive and conscious. She felt lightheaded with relief.

'Who is it? Jody?

'Yes, Adam, it's me. Bess was getting into a real stew back at the house when you failed to arrive back on time,' Jody said, forcing her voice to remain calm. 'Are you in pain?'

'No. Can't feel a damn thing. Just cold.'

She pulled off her sweater, uncaring of the fact that she was wearing nothing more than a bra beneath it. All she cared about was getting help, and as quickly as she could. Meanwhile, he could make use of her sweater and be made a little more comfortable. She folded it and placed it under his head. 'I'll get help.' She made to dash away, but his hand shot out and caught her wrist.

'Why bother? There's nothing or no one to stop you from escaping now. You don't care what happens to me in fact, I should have imagined you would rejoice in seeing me in a position such as this. Why not make use of this golden opportunity — and escape?'

Jody looked at him — a big, powerful man, completely helpless, trapped and unable to do anything to help himself. He was dependent on her and it gave her a curious feeling to know that it was in her power to help him. For the first time in her life, someone needed her help. She smiled. 'Ask me that question again later and perhaps then I'll tell you why.'

It seemed an age before the men who came from neighbouring farms managed to free Adam and carry him back to the house. It was all Jody could do to convince Bess

Slade that her nephew was going to be all right. And she wasn't too sure that it wasn't herself she was trying to convince as well. Mercifully, the doctor was able to come out straight away and was already at the house when Adam was brought in. After he had completed his examination and had treated Adam's injuries, he turned to Jody. 'You're Jody?' he asked, and at her affirmative he handed her the prescription slip. 'You can get into town and get these tonight?'

She nodded. 'Yes, of course, Doctor.'

'There was some suggestion made that a neighbour should fetch them, but Mr. Slade asked me to tell you that you would find the keys to his car in his desk.'

'There's no serious damage, is there, Doctor?' Bess asked anxiously.

'No. Shock, of course. He was under that weight for quite a considerable time. He will no doubt suffer some discomfort tonight, but I have prescribed a sedative which will ease that, and also a liniment to be massaged into his legs. He has rather severe bruising and torn muscles which should keep him laid up for a while, but when the stiffness wears off he'll be as right as rain. It'll take more than a tractor to finish him, I should think.'

Jody drove carefully over the narrow, windy road in the direction of the city. Every now and then she would spot, in the beams of the car lights, an opossum dart across in front of her, or a rabbit running for his life along the side of the road, not knowing just which way to go to escape the huge noisy thing following him.

Glancing down at the petrol gauge, Jody saw the needle pointing to full. Involuntarily, she began thinking. She had a good powerful car with a tank full of petrol. She could get a long way on that. 'What a wonderful opportunity, right at

her fingertips! Adam didn't mean a thing to her, and besides, the doctor had said he was going to be all right. But at that moment he was more than likely in pain and unable to sleep. If she didn't return with the prescription then she knew Bess would never forgive her.

So what did she care? It would serve them both right. It wouldn't half pay them back for what they had done to her. Forcing her to work and slave for three months on that farm! It wasn't in Adam's power to do what he had done. It wasn't his right to take up the role of judge and jury and sentence her to hard labour for goodness knows how long, as her punishment for causing his brother's death. She could be in Hawkes Bay before morning. There she could go fruit picking and earn enough money for her fare down South.

'So what are you waiting for?' her mind prompted her. 'Go now — while you've got the chance.'

But she didn't. She waited a little time at the urgent medicine dispensary for the prescription to be made up and then, like a sleep-walker, her mind asleep but her limbs functioning automatically, she drove back to Riverview. And as she did so it suddenly occurred to her that Adam knew, he must have known, that she would have been quite capable of not returning, and yet he had especially told the doctor to send her and not one of the neighbours, as suggested no doubt by Bess. But why? To test her? If so, he had taken a pretty big risk of spending a bad night and losing a valuable car. Or hadn't he considered it a risk at all? Was he so very sure of her? Did he know that she would return? Jody grimaced. 'If so, he knew more than I did.'

It was evident that Bess had not been so sure. Jody was willing to swear that she had not sat down or stopped pacing around the house since she had left. Her greeting was

one of obvious relief. 'You're back!' she breathed thankfully.

'Yes, so now you can sit back and relax.'

Bess nodded, appearing reluctant to meet Jody's eyes. She took the package. 'I'll get it ready — and thank you, Jody.'

'It was nothing,' Jody replied airily. 'I drove as fast as I dared.' But she knew that that wasn't the reason Bess had thanked her. 'I'll take it to him.' She took the tablets and glass of water from Bess's hands. 'If I may?'

Bess hesitated. 'Well, all right, but Shona is with him.'

'Oh, is she? I might have known.' 'Well, not for long,' Jody added to herself.

Upon entering Adam's room she saw, in the light of the bedside table, Shona sitting close beside his bed. Her hand was clasping his and her blonde head was bent near to him.

For some reason even Jody couldn't explain, she felt a tightening in her throat. 'Sorry for interrupting, but your visitor will have to leave,' she said, looking at Adam.

Shona stood up and gave her an antagonistic glance. 'What gives you the right to say when visitors may come or go?' she inquired with a condescending lift of her eyebrows.

'This,' said Jody expressionlessly, holding up the glass and tablets she was holding.

'Oh.' Shona inclined her head, amusement in her eyes. She looked at Adam. 'You're a lucky man, Adam, having a nurse to look after you,' she said mockingly.

'Yes, that's right,' Jody said. 'And so, since you've acknowledged the fact, will you please take notice of what this nurse says and — go?'

Shona flushed, her self-assurance suddenly deserting her. 'Adam . . .' she appealed, and then added quickly: 'Well,

perhaps it would be best if I do go now. You're probably feeling exhausted. I'll come and see you tomorrow.' She bent to kiss him, but Jody swiftly intercepted the movement.

'None of that. Can't afford to have the patient contacting a virus, the condition he's in.'

Shona straightened. Her eyes flashed and her lips tightened in annoyance. Colour mounted in her cheeks. Casting a final hostile glance at Jody, she bade Adam good night, gathered up her handbag and left the room.

After she had gone, Jody hardly dared to look in Adam's direction. When she did it surprised her greatly to see amusement flicker in his grey eyes.

'Shona really shouldn't let you bully her,' he said.

'She deserves it if she can't stick up for herself!'

'Oh, she'll learn to, don't worry about that. She just isn't used to that kind of treatment. She's led a very sheltered and protected life. I doubt whether she has ever come into contact with one of Palmerston's Hell's Angels before.'

'Larry's Rebels,' Jody corrected him.

'Give her time and she'll probably give back as good as you hand out.'

'I doubt it. Her kind have never had to face up to anything but the sunny side of life. She'll never have to venture into the shadows.'

'But you have?'

'I've never been out of them. I was born into a shadowy existence and as yet I haven't even glimpsed at the sunny side — but I intend to,' she informed him bitterly.

'What about when Brent died? Don't you think that cast a shadow over Shona's life?'

Jody answered unhesitatingly: 'Shona lost a friend, of course his death would affect her, but not as much as it would if it had been you.'

Adam disagreed. 'She was in love with Brent. Ever since I can remember.'

Jody shook her head fiercely. 'Don't be blind! It's you she imagines she's in love with.'

'Imagines?'

'She's the type who lives to get married and probably would marry the first guy who came along. She's lived so long with doting parents she couldn't face up to a cold, unfriendly world on her own. She needs security, someone to lean on, someone who would dote on her and devote all his time to her and her whims and wishes. Her definition of love. The helpless clinging type who needs someone big and strong to depend on.'

'Whereas you are exactly the opposite?'

'I've had to be. I've never had parents who doted on me, whom I could lean and depend on, no one whom I could cling to. I've never had security, so I won't miss what I've never had.'

'What about your aunt and uncle?'

'My aunt detested me.'

'That was your own fault, surely?'

Jody shook her head. 'She never wanted me, but Uncle Perry was my father's brother, and so he felt it was his duty to take me in. Perhaps he was fond of me, I don't know. Roseann was a domineering woman and did all she could to turn him against me, but that was where she failed to get him to succumb to her domination, though goodness knows why. I did enough to help her there.'

'There must have been some reason for her wanting to be rid of you?'

'Don't tell me Bess hasn't told you that?'

'Bess hasn't discussed your family background with me at all.'

'I can hardly credit that.'

'It's the truth,' he assured her.

Jody accepted his word and explained: 'Roseann was an immoral woman, and the reason she did everything she could to get rid of me was because I found her out — and if I wanted to I could have proved it. She knew that I only had to tell Uncle Perry and — well, heaven knows what would have happened. I never did, though. Poor Uncle Perry had enough to contend with with me. But knowing that I could blow the whole works up in her face almost scared Roseann into a panic. She had to get rid of me somehow, and now she has. I'm no longer a danger to either of them or their precious position . . .' She stopped suddenly. 'I'm sorry, I'm talking too much. You'd better take these tablets and I'll go and let you sleep or else Mrs. Slade will be walking a hole in your lounge carpet.'

'As she reached out to turn off the bedside light, his hand caught her wrist. 'Why did you come back tonight?' he asked. 'You had two opportunities to escape. Why didn't you take them?'

Jody looked down at his hand, hardworked and as strong as steel. She could feel the roughness of his palm like hardened leather against her skin. 'You were very sure of me, weren't you?'

'No, I wasn't. I wasn't sure of you at all. I'm not normally a gambling man, but I gambled tonight.'

'You were testing me,' she accused.

'I guess I was.'

'I — I wasn't going to come back. You nearly lost your gamble. I was going to drive on to Hawkes Bay and get a job there.'

'Then why didn't you?'

'Because you needed me,' she answered simply. 'That's

why I didn't go and leave you trapped beneath that tractor without getting help. You needed me. Didn't you?' There was a hint of anxious pleading in her voice. 'You did need me?'

'Yes,' he answered, 'I certainly needed someone.'

'Nobody has ever needed me before. No one — not ever. Even Mrs. Slade needed me. She had to rely on me,' she spoke tensely.

Adam released her wrist and she put out the light.

'Is it so important for you to be needed?' he asked as he heard her opening the door.

Jody was silent for a moment. 'Yes, I think it is. All my life I've been in search of something — I didn't know what — just something. Now, tonight, I've found out what it is I've been looking for. I need to be needed. I need people to want and need me.'

'Everybody needs somebody, Jody.'

'Yes. If they didn't, what would be the point or purpose in life and living?'

'I'm glad you've found yours.'

'So am I,' she answered softly. 'Good night, Adam.'

In the days that followed the world seemed, to Jody, a far better world to live in than it had ever done before. Life took on a new meaning and her fits of depression and rebellion subsided and didn't occur nearly so often as they had done previously. She was happier and gayer, and even sensed a slight friendliness in both Adam and Bess's attitude towards her. She hoped and prayed humbly that they could some day find it in their hearts to forgive her for the pain she had caused them by her foolish thoughtlessness. And she worked hard to obtain that goal.

On the Friday after Adam was permitted to be up and

about once more, he asked Jody to drive him into the city.

'I've got to stock up on certain supplies and see about insurance and other matters,' he told her.

'Sure, I'd love to.' Jody's eyes lit up at the thought of being in the city again. It had been so long, and now, because of it being so near Christmas, the shops and streets would be bright and gay with decorations and thronging with Christmas shoppers.

She dressed in rich brown linen shift and gold thongs and a shoulder bag to match. Owing to the weather being so hot she wore no nylons or make-up and pulled her hair back into a ponytail, tying it at the nape of her neck. Adam sat watching her as she drove into the city, concentrating avidly on the road in front. The skin of her bare arms and legs, face and neck was healthily pink beneath a smooth layer of honey tan. Her hair, which had once been a dreadful, unnatural red, lank and lifeless, was now a shiny brown, strands of which had been streaked gold by the sun. 'I can't believe that this is the girl who arrived at Riverview three months ago. A completely different picture!'

'A compliment?' Jody laughed at him, nonetheless feeling a curious thrill of pleasure.

'I'd say so.' Abruptly he changed the subject. 'It's Aunt Bess's birthday a week before Christmas, so we're putting on a bit of a party and dance for her — a sort of combined birthday and Christmas party.'

'We?'

'Yes. Shona has offered to give me a hand and send out invitations and see to a few other arrangements.'

Jody experienced a sharp pain of hurt and resentment. 'Couldn't I have — helped out?'

'Yes, you can and will,' ignoring the tense in which she had asked the question. 'There's a lot of arranging to do in

setting up the decorations and the cleaning of the barn. We thought it would be a good idea to have a barbecue in the garden and a barn dance afterwards.'

'Yes, it sounds terrific,' she agreed, not sounding at all enthusiastic.

Adam shot her a quick look. 'I was hoping that you would choose the decorations and perhaps a gift for Bess in town today, while I attend to the business matters. And also you could buy yourself a dress to wear for the occasion.'

Immediately, Jody's dashed spirits rose at these suggestions. 'Yes, of course, I'd love to.'

'Good. If we can find a permanent park somewhere, we could meet and have dinner later.'

She was being left on her own for most of the afternoon, but any thought of trying to escape didn't enter her mind. She thoroughly enjoyed choosing party decorations and a frock for herself, and later, while waiting for their dinner to be brought to them in the popular Chinese restaurant they had decided to go to, Jody showed Adam the gift she had selected for Bess.

'That's ideal,' he approved. 'And what about yourself? Didn't you manage to find a dress you liked?'

'I did, but it's in the car, and anyway I'm not showing it to you. You can see it on the night. I'd better take this out to the car before it gets soiled.' She dashed out of the restaurant and over the road to where the car was parked.

Then, in just a few seconds, the happy feeling of contentment she had been experiencing vanished abruptly at the sound of a voice saying: 'Hi, Jody!'

She looked up, her hands suddenly cold and uncomfortably clammy. Sitting on the bicycle bar situated on the pavement just in front of the car were Rod Bains and several members, all male, of the old gang.

'Hi, Rod,' she said, and nervously cleared her throat.

'Long time no see?' he said, twirling a silver chain around and around his forefinger.

'Yes, isn't it?' wishing fervently that she didn't have to pass by them to get back to the restaurant.

'Saw you going into the Chinese restaurant. I couldn't believe my eyes. You've changed. I hardly recognized you.' He got to his feet and sauntered over to her.

Instinctively she backed away from him until she felt the cold steel of the car through the line of her frock. Seeing her action, Rod threw a glance at the others in the gang before stepping up closer to her. 'What's the matter, baby? Not afraid of me, are you? You, who was never afraid of anyone or anything?' He took her wrists. She twisted them, trying to free herself and at once his hold tightened painfully and he held her arms back against the door. He laughed. 'Hey, take it easy! It's me, Rod Bains, remember?'

'Let me go, Rod. Please!' Jody demanded calmly. Out of the corner of her eye she glimpsed the other youths ambling forward and gathering around them.

'I want a kiss — just for old times' sake. You're still my girl.'

'I'm not your girl, Rod. I never was your girl. Now please let me go!'

'Ohhh, now you've hurt me!' he mocked, in a pained voice. 'I still want you to be my girl. I'm not holding it against you for throwing me over like you did and taking up with that nice, clean-cut, clean-living farmer boy. But he's dead now, isn't he? Too bad about that. But you've still got me, and I don't mind if you're all nice and clean and dressed in those square duds.' Then he began kissing her.

She could smell the beer on his breath and the odour on his clothes, and felt sick. Revulsion shuddered through her

and wildly she fought to be free of his hands and slack mouth, tears of helplessness and anger running down her cheeks. Again she was visited by a feeling that she was being smothered. It was just as it had been with Harry Lawson. 'Oh God, if only Adam were here! If only he'd come!'

And then, as if in answer to her prayer, Adam did come. It happened so quickly that all she was aware of was that Rod Bains no longer held her but was instead at her feet, groggily trying to get into an upright position.

'Take him home,' Adam told the rest of the gang. 'And a word of warning. The next one who so much as lays a finger on Jody will get more than just a smack under the ear. Do you understand? Now clear off!'

After they had gone, Adam turned to Jody who was standing with her clenched knuckles pressed into her wet cheeks. 'This saving you from the undesirable advances of amorous and equally undesirable men seems to be becoming quite a regular occupation of mine, doesn't it?' he said wryly.

'Oh, if — if you hadn't come . . .' Without pausing to think she ran to him. It seemed to be the most natural thing in the world for him to open his arms to her. 'Oh, I — I couldn't bear it. I — hate men!' she sobbed, her hands clinging tightly to his broad shoulders.

He laughed and gently brought down her hands, then holding her wrists, he said teasingly, 'I thought you were the self-sufficient and not the clinging type. Come on, I'll run you home.'

'No, no I'll be all right. I can drive.'

'No, you won't, Now hop in. We can get something to eat when we get back home.'

'Yes, when we get back home,' she thought, and with a sigh she settled back against the cool upholstery. She felt

safe and secure sitting here beside Adam—and she liked the feeling. It was true she had clung to him, and she could have gone right on clinging. Hastily she checked herself and began wiping her face with the clean handkerchief Adam had given her and scrubbed her lips with it.

‘You knew those guys?’ he asked.

‘Yes, they were some members of the gang.’

‘And that one causing all the trouble; wasn’t he the one you were dancing with at the Flamenco?’

‘Yes, she nodded. ‘I don’t know how, then, I ever allowed him to kiss me. It was repulsive — he’s repulsive.’

‘You couldn’t have thought so at the time.’

‘I know. How I wish I knew then what I know now. No one would have been hurt and — Brent wouldn’t be dead.’

‘Brent would still have been dead and you — well, you would still be mixed up, depressed and restless and still searching for that certain something which you would probably never have found. Then what would have become of the unfortunate teenager when she reached the crossroads?’

‘I would, no doubt, have taken the wrong road.’

‘And so all would have been lost and nothing would have been gained.’

‘Oh, but there would. Brent would still be alive,’ Jody argued.

‘Jody. . . .’

‘Yes?’

‘Never mind.’

‘That’s the second time you’ve done that.’

‘Done what?’

‘Gone to tell me something and then changed your mind.’

Adam didn’t answer and so, feeling both disappointed and bewildered, Jody said nothing more.

CHAPTER SIX

THE big day eventually arrived. The garden looked beautiful, lit with coloured lanterns and lined with paper-covered trestles on top of which were set the punch-bowls, cold food, plates and cutlery. All that was needed now were the people, and they were arriving, slowly but surely.

Jody had worked hard throughout that day in preparation for Bess's party and felt quite proud of herself. Everything had worked out perfectly. For some reason she wanted it to be a big success for Bess. Only when everyone had eaten did Jody feel that she would be able to stop working and escape and change out of the old clothes she had put on to help serve out the food. But in the meantime, the crowd of about eighty or a hundred or so people were obviously enjoying themselves and Jody could see that Bess, flushed and smiling, was thrilled and overwhelmed with all the excitement of being the centre of attention.

Being the type of person she was, Bess couldn't stand back and watch Jody rushing around, fetching and carrying for everyone, and not get in and help, so Jody had a great deal of difficulty in forcing her to remain the guest of honour she was.

'Let me help with those dishes, Jody. You're missing out on the fun. Go and get changed and join in with the young ones,' she pleaded.

'No! You can't help, you'll spoil your dress. And besides, I've plenty of helpers already. I'll join in the dancing, so don't worry about me. Now, you go and enjoy yourself.'

At last, dressed in her new frock, her hair flowing free

and her make-up applied sparingly and carefully, Jody emerged from her bedroom and went through to the dining-room, where she stopped abruptly. Adam was standing in the middle of the room. He had obviously been waiting for her.

‘Well, well, so this is the new frock that has been such a well-kept secret,’ he said, his eyes sweeping over her.

‘Yes. Like it?’ she asked, turning around. It was made of white crêpe, low-cut both back and front, with a long inverted panel in the front starting from just below the bust-line and a small line of covered buttons.

‘Of course. It suits you admirably.’

‘Thank you. But what are you doing here? I thought you’d already be over at the barn dance.’ Then she added: ‘You weren’t checking up on me, were you?’

Adam smiled and shook his head. ‘I was making sure that you were on your way. Aunt Bess was worrying, thinking that you might still be working, so I told her that I’d come and fetch you.’

‘I see.’

‘That’s the truth,’ he said. ‘Would you like a drink before we go? I’d like to propose a toast.’

Jody looked at him in surprise. ‘All right, I’ll drink to whatever it is.’

Silently, he poured two drinks and handed her one. Raising his own, he said: ‘A toast to you, Jody, that you may do well in whatever you attempt to accomplish when you leave here, that you find someone who wants, needs and loves you and who will bring you the happiness you’ve been looking for.’ He took a drink from his glass, his gaze not leaving hers.

‘I — I don’t understand,’ she said at last. ‘Do you mean — are you saying. . . .’

‘You’re free to go, Jody, just whenever you wish.’

Still Jody remained staring at him uncomprehendingly. ‘I don’t understand,’ she repeated, more to herself than to him. He was telling her that she could go whenever she wished. She was free — that she understood. What she didn’t understand was the reason why her heart plummeted down into her shoes. Why didn’t she feel — feel elated, feel like running and dancing for joy?

‘Jody, why are you looking like that?’

‘Like what?’

‘As though I’d passed a death sentence on you.’

To her horror, tears sprang to her eyes. She set her glass down on the table and made a dash for the door.

‘Jody! What’s the matter — for crying out loud!’ Adam called after her, but she continued on across the now deserted lawn, towards the barn.

With a crash, Adam’s own glass went to join hers on the table. ‘Women!’ he muttered, striding after her.

Furious with herself, Jody blinked back the tears which, wiped away or allowed to run, would surely ruin her make-up. She came to the entrance to the barn and stopped. No one was dancing. Instead Jim Barrie seemed to be holding everyone’s attention with what he had to say. Jody guessed from his manner and slightly slurred speech that he was a little under the weather. Nevertheless, she found her attention captured too.

‘So if everybody would fill their glasses. I’d like to propose a toast. To my daughter’s engagement to my neighbour and also very good and true friend, Adam Slade. Let’s drink to their happiness together. Say, where is Adam . . . ?’

The barn became alive with singing and cheering and clinking of glasses. The band started up and people began dancing, while Jody, standing as if nailed to the spot, looked

on unseeingly.

So now she knew the reason why Adam was allowing her to go. There wouldn't be room for her when he and Shona were married. 'Why couldn't he have come right out and said so?' she wondered bitterly. 'Why didn't he tell me, and why do I mind so much?' She knew only too well why she minded so much. Closing her eyes, she turned away and walked straight into Adam, who was standing directly behind her, and she guessed he had been for some time.

Quickly, she jumped back and looked up at him. Then recovering her poise, she said mockingly: 'Well, well, quite a night for toasts, don't you think? You'd better get in and do your duty — oh, and don't forget to drink to your aunt's birthday. After all, it is her night tonight, isn't it?' she walked past him, stopped and turned back. 'Oh yes, I nearly forgot. Congratulations on your engagement.' She reached out and took his hand. 'This is congratulations from Brent,' she said, shaking it. 'And this is congratulations from me.' And stepping forward, she curved an arm around his neck. Bringing his head down to hers, she kissed him on his mouth, slowly and deliberately, for the benefit of the on-lookers who had paused in their merrymaking to watch from the interior of the barn.

The old Jody, which she thought had gone for ever, was back, and in full force. Releasing him, she turned and ran, and headed in the direction of the stables.

'Let him explain his way out of that one,' she told Mecca, the horse she was saddling. 'Let him marry his precious Shona Barrie! I'll show him how much *I* care!' But the truth always hurts. 'What does he care how I feel; whether I care or not?'

She rode the horse long and hard. She didn't let up until she was once more within the stable yards some hours

later. Everyone had left, it seemed, as there was no sign of life or lights. For that Jody was thankful. She slid down off the animal, who stood panting and trembling violently. The sweat oozed from her and ran off her coat on to the ground. 'I'm sorry, Mecca. . . .'

'And so you damn well ought to be!'

Jody swung around to see Adam stepping out from the shadows. 'You ought to be whipped for riding a horse to such an extent. What did you want to do? Kill it?' he snapped harshly, and jerked the reins from her hands.

'I'm — I'm sorry. I — I guess I just didn't think. . . .'

'You never do, do you, Jody?' he said meaningfully. 'Act first and regret your impulsiveness later. I'd thought you'd learned, but you're still as imbecile as ever. I'll take care of Mecca. Go on back to the house and wait up for me. I want to talk to you.'

When Adam returned about half an hour later, he found Jody standing in front of the liquor cabinet, pouring herself a drink.

'How many of those have you had?' he demanded.

She turned around to face him, cradling her glass in both hands. 'Three,' she told him sweetly. 'Any objections to my celebrating my departure?' She lifted her glass and tilted it to her lips, but before she could take a drink, Adam had whipped it from her grasp and thrown it on the hearth. She tensed at the sound of shattering glass.

'No, no objection at all,' he grated, 'if that was the reason you had three. Somehow I've got the idea that you were shying away from facing up to the consequences of what you did to that horse.'

'And what are the consequences? I can face up to anything.'

'With three in, I don't doubt it. What happened out

there to make the horse so frightened?’

‘Frightened?’ she echoed.

‘Yes. It’s taken me a devil of a time to soothe her. Something must have given her a scare.’

‘Nothing frightened her!’ she spat. ‘She was just being temperamental, kept tossing her head and wanting to turn back.’

Adam sighed angrily. ‘Haven’t you learned anything? Anything at all since you’ve been here? When you leave are you going to be the better person we discussed late one night some time ago, or are you going to go back to being the Jody who first arrived? And go through life a no-hoper?’

‘Yes, probably!’ she rapped. ‘I’m what I am and I can’t change that. I’ve tried, and indeed, on that night you spoke of, I thought I had succeeded, but tonight told me—told *ua* all—that I hadn’t. One can’t change just like that,’ she snapped her fingers in front of his face. ‘And besides, I no longer think I want to. If people can’t accept me the way I am then hard luck for them.’

‘No, hard luck for you,’ Adam corrected.

‘Well then, that’s my worry, isn’t it, not yours?’

‘There’s no need to shout!’

‘I’m not shouting! You’re shouting at *me*!’

Adam sighed heavily and turned away from her. ‘Go to bed.’

‘Is that all you wanted to talk to me about?’

‘We can discuss the details of your departure tomorrow.’

‘And it can’t be too soon for you, can it?’

When he didn’t answer, she did as he said and went to bed. For a long time she lay, unable to sleep, watching the shadows, clouds passing over the moon, reflected on her bedroom wall.

‘What an odd night,’ she thought. ‘How still and quiet

everything is.' Not a breath of wind moved the curtains at the open window. 'And how hot! With a deep sigh she kicked off her single blanket and sheet and sent them tumbling through the still humid air into a heap on the floor at the end of her bed. Perspiration trickled down her back and across her throat and her cheeks were fiery hot against a pillow which, no matter how many times she turned its linen covering, felt as though it had just had a scorching hot iron run over it. In the end it, too, joined the bed-clothes on the floor, leaving Jody bad-tempered and debating whether or not she would get up and cut off her thick heavy hair which clung, damply and annoyingly, to her neck. Finally, after tossing from side to side countless times, she dozed off.

Then suddenly she was awake again, sitting bolt upright in bed, tense and listening, her eyes fixed on the luminous hands of her small alarm clock. Four-thirty! What on earth had woken her?

After a few seconds she heard it again, consciously this time — a low distant rumbling sound, like far-off thunder. Only she knew it wasn't thunder. An uneasy suspicion seemed to tell her that it was coming from beneath the ground, but it was over too swiftly for her to be sure. She waited, and almost at once her suspicions were confirmed. Her bed jolted and the whole house shuddered. 'An earthquake! And boy, is this going to be a beauty!' she said aloud, and lay down again. She felt her tautened muscles and nerves slowly begin to relax.

At first there were sharp, severe earth tremors, jerking and jolting the house and everything in it. Jody listened to the sounds of crockery chinking together and wobbling on their shelves in the kitchen, and the jars and bottles rattling on her dressing table. The door to her wardrobe had come

ajar and was swaying slowly to and fro, with long-drawn-out squeaks. From the direction of the lounge she heard something fall over and after a few bouncing thuds she presumed whatever it was had landed, probably chipped, on the carpet.

The sharp trembling jolts had given way to a swaying, almost rhythmic roll which continued for a few seconds, debated and started up again.

'Gosh!' No wonder Mecca was so nervy tonight, she thought, and then stopped. 'Mecca! This will be scaring her silly!'

Flying out of bed, she hastily whipped off her pyjamas and pulled on her jeans and sweater. Not waiting to put on her shoes, she dashed out of the room and up the hall towards the kitchen and, in the darkness, collided heavily with Adam who was also emerging from his room in a tearing hurry.

'Jody!'

Jody quickly righted herself and rushed on. 'Can't stop—Mecca. She'll be panic-stricken!'

'Jody! Keep away from those stables. I'm just going. . . .' He stopped at hearing the back door being closed and slapped a hand to his head in exasperation.

As Jody ran in the direction of the stables, she was surprised to find herself battling against a head wind which was, she felt positive, gale force in its strength, almost forcing her to a standstill. However, it wasn't able to thwart Adam so easily, who, being stronger than she, reached her side and grasped her arm. He propelled her over towards the shearers' quarters and thrust her against the wall, sheltered from the wind.

'Now,' he panted menacingly, his face close to hers, 'you stay put, do you hear me? Just do as you're told for once—'

and don't budge!' he released her arm.

'But Mecca....'

'I was intending, and still intend, to deal with her myself. Haven't you any brains to realize that you couldn't do anything? You wouldn't know how for a start off. You'd probably end up getting trodden to death trying — if you weren't first hit and mutilated by a piece of flying iron which could be lifted from the roof of any of these sheds. You're a damn nuisance!'

When he had gone, Jody slid down the side of the wall and sat hugging her legs and staring in front of her at the dark shapes of the trees being bent nearly double in the wind. What an eerie kind of night! First absolutely nothing, no sound and not even a breeze, and then one almighty earthquake and this wind. She listened to it wail and whine. How spooky it was! She shivered. Palmerston North was well known for its winds. Equinoctial gales they were called, and were to be expected around October, but Palmerston North was a windy city at any time. However, winds weren't quite as bad as this, on an odd occasion perhaps, but they were always more prevalent in the outlying areas of the city and around the Manawatu district. This area, for instance, where the worst of them were experienced.

Where was Adam? she wondered for the twentieth time, trying not to listen to the trees and fences creaking and the door the the shearers' quarters squeaking and thudding due to the latch not being fastened securely. How tired she was now. Surely Adam hadn't gone back to the house and forgotten her — or deliberately left her? Her drooping eyelids opened wide and she gulped at the thought. Of course he wouldn't!

Quickly she switched her thoughts to the horse. Poor

Mecca! If she hadn't ridden her so hard and so long the evening before, she probably wouldn't have taken so long to calm. Why had she done it anyway? Oh, of course, it was after she had learned that Adam was engaged to Shona Barrie. Jody swallowed, misery welling up within her as she recalled, word for word, that terrible scene between Adam and herself just before she went to bed. 'He'll be glad to get rid of me,' she thought, 'I've been nothing but a . . . Well, it was his own fault anyway!' Her lips tightened and then relaxed, and she gave a defeated sigh.

Oh, where was he? She strained her eyes to see if she could make out the outline of his dark form coming towards her — but nothing. Then suddenly her heart gave a frightened jolt. Perhaps Mecca had been too much for even him to handle. Maybe she. . . . Maybe he was lying on the floor of her stable. . . . Mental pictures flashed through her mind and without giving any further thought to his orders, she leapt to her feet and began running out of the shearers' quarters compound, across the stable yards and straight into something hard and warm — Adam's bare chest. He couldn't have waited to pull on his shirt.

'Oh, Adam!' Her voice sounded, to her own ears, both hoarse and relieved.

'I thought I told you to stay put!' He grasped her upper arms and held her away from him.

'You — you were so long. I was sure something had happened to you, that Mecca had. . . .'

'Mecca's okay now,' he told her, his voice suddenly gentle.

'I thought — I thought you might have been hurt.' To her horror she went utterly weak and helpless in his grasp, unable to control her trembling.

Adam, mistaking it for fear, tried his best to soothe her,

saying: 'Jody, there's nothing to be afraid of. The quake was a big one and this wind is a bit eerie, but it's nothing. The wind is dropping already.'

'I'm not afraid!' Jody protested huskily.

'Come on, I'll carry you back to the house.' He made to pick her up, but she pulled back out of his hands.

'I can walk!' she said violently.

They looked at each other in the light of the moon which was forcing its way through the gathering of cloud. Surprisingly enough, the wind had begun to drop and had already quietened considerably.

'You're tired,' he said.

He was, that she could see quite plainly, tired and tensed — and tolerant. 'Oh, stop telling me what I am!' she snapped. 'And stop talking to me as if I were Mecca, needing to be calmed and soothed!' Tears felt perilously near and, impatiently, she turned away and began to run back to the house.

'Jody . . . !'

'Oh, go to blazes!' she shouted over her shoulder, and continued running.

Adam sighed and gave a careless shrug, then stood, waiting, wishing he had brought his cigarettes with him. Then there came what he had been waiting for — a surprised shriek followed, almost simultaneously, by a loud splash.

Jody surfaced, struggled to her feet and gazed down at herself, that woe-is-me look on her face. In the fleeting moonlight, she made such a pitiful, lost-looking picture, standing knee-deep in water, her arms outstretched, and in a sweater which had, somehow, grown down to her knees, that Adam began to laugh.

Trembling with rage, Jody pushed her wet hair back from her face with both hands. She knew that to an onlooker she

and the whole situation must appear hilariously funny. She must look like something from out of this world. At any other time she would have laughed herself, but not now, since Adam found the whole thing so funny. She knew she was being unreasonable and this knowledge, together with her increasing desire to laugh with him but refusing to allow herself the luxury, irritated and annoyed her even more. She glared at him.

‘Well, it was inevitable, wasn’t it?’ he shrugged. ‘One of us had to end up in the horse trough.’

That sent her off, temperwise. She couldn’t keep in check any longer the wrath which she had always known, and still knew, would be an utter waste of breath as far as he was concerned. If anything it would no doubt amuse him still more — and it did.

The most she stormed and swore at him the more he laughed and forgetting, just for a split second, that she was standing knee-deep in water, she tried to stamp her foot and the sight made Adam’s laughter increase. ‘You great senseless hunk of humanity — inhumanity! You did this deliberately!’ She ranted on, furiously sniffing back tears of temper and frustration.

‘No, I didn’t,’ Adam managed at last, laughter still lurking in his voice. ‘I tried to warn you that I’d shifted the trough, but you wouldn’t listen. What I can’t understand is how you managed to avoid going a header into it on your way across.’ He laughed again uproariously.

‘Warn me! Some warning!’

‘Since when did the impulsive Jody Linton take to heeding warnings? Warned or not you always insist on blundering, without thinking, head first into every situation that crops up. Result is invariably disaster, and as three months under my supervision hasn’t changed you I doubt whether

you stand a chance. God help a poor, unsuspecting world when I set you loose in it!

'Oh, here we go again, still harping on the "no hope for the hopeless Jody Linton" story,' Jody jeered. 'I'm the typical lost soul, aren't I?'

Adam chuckled. 'You'll be all right. All you need is a firm hand.'

'A loving, guiding hand?' she mocked.

'A firm, guiding hand. I pity the poor guy who commits the folly of falling in love with you. I don't think he'd be able to keep up with you, or manage to handle you for very long.'

'So!' Jody's deepened breathing was a warning to Adam that he had got her pecker up again. 'You're saying that what I need is someone who can handle me, someone to shove me around and order me about like he'd do with a sack of spuds or to a half-starved, flea-bitten sheepdog?'

'That's right.'

'Well, you've managed to do just that so splendidly up to now!' she snapped.

He considered this for a moment or two and then inclined his head. 'So I have,' he conceded, and in two strides and with a chuckle of sheer mirth, he reached the horse trough and lifted her out, swinging her on to the ground. However, he didn't release her, and when she made an attempt to move back from him, his arms tightened around her and she was drawn up against his chest.

Taken completely by surprise, and feeling a little afraid, she began to struggle. 'Adam!' she gasped indignantly. 'Take your. . . .'

But her protest, weak though it was, remained unspoken as his head bent and his lips covered hers. Shock drained all the energy from her and for a few seconds she was limp in his arms. Then, slowly, her senses stirred to life as an

electric current shot through her, quickening her heartbeats and pulses so that they leapt and bounded, causing a sensation that she had never before experienced to such an overwhelming extent. It was a peculiarly lightheaded — and the most glorious sensation imaginable.

As always she didn't stop to think. She obeyed each impulse and wound her arms around his neck and responded, returning kiss for kiss, her ardour matching his own.

'Why?' she whispered when at last he lifted his head.

'You owe me that, I think.' His voice was quite steady.

'Owe you — that?' Jody repeated blankly.

Then comprehension seeped over her, a numb, chilling sensation; a sensation entirely opposite to the one she had experienced just a few seconds ago. She stepped away from him, her hands slipping from his bare shoulders. The moon had disappeared and she was unable to see his face very clearly. However, one thing was very clear indeed, and that was his intention to humiliate her as she must surely have humiliated him the evening before when she had kissed him in front of his fiancée and all his friends and relatives. Well, he had succeeded, she thought bitterly, turning away. If he didn't guess how she felt about him after this, then he never would. 'Oh, when am I ever going to stop and think? I forgot all about Shona Barrie. If I hadn't, this certainly would never have happened.'

'Get out of those wet clothes as quickly as possible. The water in the trough is clean, so you won't need to shower. Oh, and don't bother setting your alarm,' Adam told her when they had reached the veranda steps. 'We'll all be sleeping in in the morning.'

'Yes — in the morning,' Jody thought bleakly. In the morning — and her last morning spent at Riverview if she had anything to say about it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

'YOU don't have to leave immediately,' Adam said. 'In fact you're more than welcome to stay on indefinitely.'

'You know very well that I don't want to stay on "indefinitely". I want to leave — and now!' Jody retorted.

It was two-thirty in the afternoon and despite all her intentions of rising early that morning she had slept until eleven-thirty. So that had been that as far as her early planned departure was concerned. Her annoyance had done little to relieve the heavy, dull-throbbing headache she had awoken with, and neither had the all-knowing twinkle lurking in Bess's eyes helped it any. And to top it all she had discovered that Adam was over at Barries' farm and had been gone several hours and would, Bess had informed her, judging by the time, more than likely stay there for lunch.

Jody had barely been able to control her impatience. She had paced up and down the length of the veranda waiting for the first sign of him coming up the drive. And now here he was, calmly telling her that she could remain on indefinitely. After all that had happened here during the past months, to say nothing of the night before; and her impatient desire to get as far away as she could get from River-view and the tragedy and humiliation, she would always remember.

With her hands in the pockets of her jeans, she kicked at the veranda's wooden support beside the step on which Adam was standing. She was finding it extremely difficult to look at his face, let alone hold his gaze with her usual

belligerence.

He sighed. 'Well, perhaps tomorrow or the day after. When I've had time to make a few inquiries in Palmerston as regards a job and a place to stay.'

Jody's head shot up at this. 'No! You said last night that I could leave just as soon as I wanted to. I've got my things packed and I want to leave now — today. And don't bother finding me a job. I'll get my own job. As for accommodation, I can stay at the girls' hostel until I find a flat.'

Adam stared at her intently and she congratulated herself on being successful in meeting his stare without flinching or betraying any sign of emotion whatsoever. 'Very well,' he agreed finally. 'You know that you'll find it difficult to secure a job just at present — with all the school-leavers also wanting jobs?' When she didn't reply he gestured resignedly. 'If that's what you want.'

'It's exactly what I want!' Turning on her heel, she went inside to collect her two suitcases from where she had left them side by side on the floor of her bedroom, together with several other odds and ends. Pausing in the doorway to take one last look at the room she had occupied during her stay she thought how bare it looked now. Without her belongings cluttering up the space on the dresser and one or two articles of clothing strewn here and there, it was left exactly the way she had found it. Abruptly, she turned away and hurried back out to the veranda and dropped her cases down on the wooden boards.

'So you're leaving?' Bess looked up from the task of laying the bunch of cut flowers on the sheet of paper she had spread out in the shade of the veranda.

'Yes, I'm leaving. No doubt you're relieved and glad to be rid of me at last.'

Bess shook her head. 'Surprising though it may seem, I'll

miss not having you around. You're quite at liberty to stay on, you know. Why don't you, at least until after the New Year?"

'Thank you, but I've already made it clear to Adam that I want to leave.'

'And do you? Really want to leave?'

'I've been wanting to leave ever since I first arrived, or hadn't you noticed? Where is Adam anyway?' Jody looked away from Bess's shrewd, searching gaze and scanned the veranda and garden.

'Right here.' Adam came up behind her and picked up her two suitcases. 'Do you want to come along for the ride, Bess?' he asked his aunt.

Bess shook her head. 'No, I'd better see to these flowers before they wilt.'

'Right. I shouldn't be long.' He strode off towards the car parked on the driveway, carrying a case in each hand.

'Well, good-bye — and thanks for everything.' Jody held out her hand to Bess.

Bess took it in her own and gave it a firm squeeze. 'Good-bye, Jody, and if you feel that you ever want to come back, you're more than welcome — as a guest this time. But in either event I do hope you'll visit us occasionally and perhaps drop us a line once in a while and let us know how you're getting on.'

'I won't promise anything, but if I can, I will. And thanks again.' Jody bent to retrieve the rest of her belongings and hurried down the veranda steps across to where Adam sat waiting in the car. She blinked vigorously against the watery blur rising before her eyes. Nothing was going to induce her to let Adam know just how much she minded leaving River-view, Bess — and him. She shoved her duffle-bag and coat, which had been too bulky to pack, on to the back seat and

slid in front next to Adam, her teeth tightly clenched.

However, in spite of all her resolutions, a betraying sniff must have made itself heard, for she found Adam's handkerchief thrust on to her lap. 'What's that for?' And when he didn't answer she thrust it back at him. 'I don't want it!'

He shrugged, not taking his eyes off the road in front of him. 'You sound as though you've got a touch of the sniffles. Must have been that ducking in the horse-trough.'

Was he daring to laugh at her? She swung around swiftly, but from his profile she gained that his expression was quite unreadable. Deliberately she gave a loud sniff and turned away to stare out of the window beside her for the remainder of the journey.

The large room she was allotted at the girls' hostel was pleasant, but it could never compare with the one she had recently vacated. She also found that she was going to have to share it with three other girls. But, she decided, it was better than nothing.

She went back down to the foyer where Adam was waiting.

'How do you like it?' he asked.

'I like it fine,' she replied without hesitation.

He nodded and reached inside his back pocket, withdrew a long white envelope and handed it to her.

'What is it?' She eyed it suspiciously.

'There's a bit of money in there which I think you'll find will come in handy.'

'Something you owe *me* this time?' she piped in with a certain amount of dry sarcasm.

He shrugged. 'Call it wages if you like. I consider you've earned it.'

'Do you now? Well, I don't want it and I don't need it! I'm not completely destitute.'

'Take it!' he said in a voice that was not to be argued with. 'You don't know for just how long you'll be without a job.'

She laughed. 'No. That's a point certainly worth taking into consideration. No telling how long I'll be out of work, knowing my qualifications — *and* the lack of them.'

He took her hand and closed her fingers about the envelope. 'Good-bye, Jody, and good luck.'

Desolate, she watched his tall, wide-shouldered figure disappear out of the foyer, and a little while later she picked up her suitcases and carried them upstairs.

In the days that followed, Jody searched through the Situations Vacant columns of the local newspaper, but never came across any position she either fancied or was qualified for. At school she had taken up a domestic science course which she had loathed and so paid very little attention to her lessons. She had played away the years, living for the day when she would become eligible to leave school and start working for her living.

And now this was proving to be the outcome. There were several factory positions available, but she felt incapable of facing up to factory work again. There were vacancies for shop assistants, but were required to be senior and with experience. Office jobs were innumerable, but what good were they to her? She couldn't even type her name, and besides, employers would expect applicants of her age to have had some years' previous experience.

Christmas came and went. Most of the girls staying at the hostel had left to spend it at home with their families, and so Jody remained, almost alone, with hardly anybody to talk to and with nothing much to do. She remembered the way in which Christmas and New Year had been cele-

brated when living with her aunt and uncle — parties galore, one after the other and with only the élite of their society invited. Jody wondered whether she was in fact more alone each Christmas she had spent there than at this one spent at the girls' hostel.

At last, when the first days of January had well and truly gone, Jody was successful in obtaining a position as a waitress in the tearooms of one of the city's flourishing department stores.

She liked it there for a while. It was a modern store and the rooms situated on the top floor possessed huge windows which looked out over the Square, sections of the city and the ranges of mountainous hills stretching behind it.

As time progressed so did her friendship with Lee Hodges. Jody got on well with all three of her room-mates. Cheryl and Anne were the quieter of the three, but she recognized Lee to be a girl like herself — or at least, like the girl she used to be, and it was into her friendship that she drifted more deeply than she did into either of the others'. She hadn't planned it that way — it just seemed to happen.

Lee was a swinger. She knew where all the action and parties were and was seldom in bed before one o'clock each morning and even later during the week-ends. The doors to the hostel were closed each night at eleven o'clock and some hours later at week-ends. According to the rules, the girls residing there had to be in by the stated times. However, Lee had the route up the fire-escape so well memorized and practised that closed doors didn't put forward any problem at all.

'If I got caught, though, it would be the end,' she had confided in Jody. 'But while the going's good I intend to make the best of it. It's fun, you ought to try it some time.'

Why not come with me on Saturday? There's going to be a real swinging party out at Awahuri.'

'Awahuri!' Jody echoed. 'But that's some miles out into the country. How are you going to get out there?'

'By car. Eric has an old Zephyr that we all pile into. It's a wreck, but it gets us there, and that's the main thing. Well, how about it? Would you like to come?'

'I guess so. Whose party is it?'

Lee shrugged. She was sitting cross-legged on the bed, a comic spread open on her lap and a half-eaten apple held in one hand. She bit into the apple. 'I don't know,' — speaking with her mouth full — 'some engagement party or other. What does it matter so long as there's plenty of guys and grog?'

Jody couldn't help laughing. She sat watching Lee poring avidly over her comic, long strands of dyed hair falling forward on either side of her cheeks. It seemed years ago when she herself had been an exact replica of Lee. Now she felt a good deal older and long since grown past the phase which Lee was still wrapped up in.

She had no particular yen to go to this party being held at Awahuri, but neither did she possess any desire to remain alone at the hostel—alone and where she could think. The last thing she wanted to do was think. And just lately, when left on her own, her despondent thoughts were becoming an unshakable companion and she began to experience the bouts of depression which she had been so sure were gone for ever. Gone when she had realized that more than anything else she wanted to belong.

Working day after day as a waitress certainly wasn't what she wanted. She was well aware that the people she waited on never gave any thought to whom was serving them. They couldn't really care whether it was she, Jody

Linton, or the man in the moon. For all the notice they ever took of her she might just as well be as remote and fictitious as he was. Discontentment had begun to settle in, she had to admit. To endeavour to forget it and alleviate her constant heartache she decided that going out to this party might be a good idea.

As Lee had predicted, the party was a swinging one. To Jody it was quite like old times. She went prepared to enjoy herself, and so she did until the time came when she felt sure she would be deafened by the noise if not first squashed by the crowd which greatly consisted of gate-crashers like herself.

'What did I ever see in this to find so enjoyable?' she wondered as she was transferred from one pair of arms to another as often as the youths not dancing were refilling their glasses with beer.

After enduring being shuffled around the decidedly cramped space for a painful few hours, she finally managed to break away. She edged her way to the door and stumbled outside into the cooler fresh air. What a relief it was to be able to be free from the noise and nauseating beer fumes!

It was quiet outside except for the sounds which she knew so well, the sounds of the country. She strolled for a while, trying to ignore them. After all, there was no other reason why Awahuri should remind her of Riverview. For one thing it was flatter country. There was no sign of huge dark shapes resembling hills anywhere, not gigantic hills at any rate. But as the sound of music grew fainter and fainter and the tangy odours of earth and trees became more noticeable, Jody abruptly turned back and found herself running until she was once again amongst the jostling people and breathing in the beer-polluted atmosphere.

'Jody! I've been looking for you everywhere.' The sound

of Lee's somewhat slurred voice rose above the din.

Turning, Jody saw her, her arm about the waist of a boy she neither recognized nor whom she liked the look of. 'Lee, have you any idea what the time is?' she asked.

'Eh?'

'The time!' Jody repeated, louder.

'Oh, don't bother about that.' Lee dismissed that enemy with a wave of her hand. 'Are you enjoying yourself?'

'Oh, sure,' Jody replied dryly.

Lee laughed. 'A real humdinger, eh? What'd I tell you? We're having a ball, aren't we, Warren?'

'Wayne,' the youth corrected.

'Oh, Wayne then.' Lee lifted her shoulders. 'What does it matter? So long as you can dance. See you later, Jody.'

'But, Lee. . . .' Jody sighed and dropped her arm as Lee became immersed with the crowd. A glance at her watch told her that it was now two-thirty a.m. and instinct told her that it would be well after four-thirty before they arrived back at the hostel—if then. If only they weren't so far out of town she could tell Lee that she would walk back and find her own way up the fire-escape. As it was the only thing she could do to get away from it all was to sit in the car and wait.

The clock tower in the centre of the Square was chiming four-forty-five when Lee, a little the worse for wear, and herself were climbing the iron rungs of the hostel's fire-escape. Lee went up first, for she was well familiar with the route, and behind her Jody followed, watching as closely as she could in the dark, for this side of the building, away from the glare of orange street lights, was bathed in shadows.

'Managing?' Lee whispered as they were nearing the top of the steps.

Jody lifted her downbent head, her attention momentarily diverted. 'Yes, so far....' Then she broke off with a sharp cry as her foot slipped and, failing in her desperate battle to regain her balance, she slid off the narrow stairway and through the opening beneath the hand-rail. With her legs flailing in mid-air and her heart palpitating with fright, she strove to reach up and clutch at the iron rung which she had caught with only one hand. She missed each time and regardless of her gritting determination she felt her single grip begin to weaken under the strain of her weight. She was sure that her arm wouldn't take much more before being wrenched from its socket, and the pain and despair released a strangled sound from her throat.

'Jody! Quick, give me your hand. For God's sake, give me your hand!' Lee said in a low, panic-filled voice, leaning as far forward as she dared, trying to find in the dark Jody's outstretched arm.

'I—I can't reach,' Jody sobbed. Then suddenly, without warning, her supporting arm gave way, tearing itself out of Lee's grip, and she screamed as she felt herself falling, a horrible sensation of which she had often dreamed but was relieved to awake and find that it had been nothing more than a dream.

However, when she regained consciousness she knew, from the pain which shot through her and the inability to move even if she had wanted to, that she had not been dreaming this time. Neither was she dreaming the men in white overalls nor the crowd of brunch-coat-clad girls who were standing some distance back, watching with shock written in their faces, mask-like in the light shining through the hostel windows behind them.

Somewhere in her pain-clouded mind dawned the realization that Adam would be notified and that there would

more than likely be a newspaper report covering the incident. The latter of which wouldn't be at all welcome as far as Roseann and Uncle Perry were concerned. Somehow she would have to ensure that neither eventuated.

Just then she was aware of a hand anxiously gripping hers — Lee's hand. And it was Lee's terror-stricken face that wavered before her vision and became blurred and out of focus, all the time receding back further and further. . . .

'Fractured arm and slipped disc! Well, that's good-bye to my job,' Jody thought dismally, unable to sleep and staring into the darkness of the hospital room which she shared with three other patients. 'But I guess I should be thankful I'm still alive,' she reconciled.

Her mind went back over what Lee had told her during visiting hours earlier that evening. She had of course been asked to leave the hostel — they both had. So with no job and no accommodation, the question of her future loomed ahead of her none too brightly.

'Cheryl is also leaving,' Lee had informed her. 'When she manages to get a flat close enough to town. What are you going to do when you leave here?'

Jody shrugged.

'When will you be discharged? Have you any idea?'

'When I'm able to walk out, I suppose. I twisted my knee out of joint a bit when I fell and it's strapped up so that I can't move it — not that I want to.'

Lee sighed. 'You don't know what a fright you gave me when you slipped. And then, when you fell, your scream just paralysed me. I'm sure glad you're okay.'

Jody smiled wryly. 'Okay? I feel as though I've been run over by a bulldozer, and I know I'm going to feel far worse when I see the report in the newspaper.'

'Oh, there isn't going to be any write-up,' Lee assured her quickly.

'There isn't?'

'No. Don't you remember? When you came to for a few seconds before you were put into the ambulance you asked me to tell Matron not to contact some guy called Adam, or the newspapers. "Most important," you said, and then flaked out.' Lee leaned over and helped herself to a few of the grapes she had brought and had given to Jody.

'Thank heaven!' Jody breathed.

'You weren't very coherent, but I thought I'd better tell Matron.'

'You did tell her and she agreed?'

'Cross my heart. If you ask me she was only too willing not to let the press in on this. Wouldn't be too good for the hostel, would it?' Lee laughed gleefully.

'What about — what about — Adam?' Jody held her breath.

'Who? Oh, him. Well, Matron was rather dubious about that, but seeing that he wasn't a close relative or anything, and that the medical reports stated that you were in a "satisfactory condition" — not that that ever means anything — Matron agreed not to contact him and that if you wanted to yourself then you could easily arrange it with the doctor here at the hospital. Gosh, these grapes are gorgeous!' Lee babbled on and Jody, not paying very close attention, let her mind wander.

'Jody!'

'Eh, what?'

'I said who is this guy — Adam?' Lee was saying.

'Oh — er — just a friend — well, a friend more or less — an acquaintance, let's say.'

Lee eyed her shrewdly. 'Mmmm, a boy-friend would be

more like it.' Then, grimacing, she went on: 'On second thoughts the grapes are a bit sour. By the way, Cheryl said she'd be coming in to see you tomorrow during her lunch hour.'

'Her lunch hour? But visiting hours aren't until after two.'

Lee shrugged. 'She said something about getting her lunch hour changed. Privileged, eh?'

'It would appear so. What are you going to do now — about accommodation?'

'Well, I'm paid up until Monday week. After then I'll probably move in with my sister and her husband until I find a suitable flat. Say, why don't you and I get a flat together?'

'I very much doubt whether that would be either wise or safe.' Jody's laughter was restricted by the protest from her stiff, aching body. 'But I'll think about it.' However, it required very little thought before she decided that the answer to Lee's proposal would be no. It just wouldn't work, she told herself.

The hours continued to drag on and she found herself recollecting the time when she had been forced to remain in bed for a week after the car accident in which Brent had been killed. She had had nothing else to occupy her mind then except the enormity of what she had done. That, and her incapacity, a state she had been unable to get used to or accept, had weighed down heavily upon her, causing flares of irritation and increased nervous tension. This time, from the way circumstances were shaping, she could well be inactive for much longer than a week and with several additional worries to invade her mind.

As Lee had said she would, Jody received a visit from Cheryl on Tuesday afternoon, a break in the monotony and

a welcome relief from her not very companionable thoughts.

'Hi,' Cheryl greeted her. 'How are you feeling?'

'Fed up with my own company.'

'Then in that case I hope you like reading. I've brought you a few magazines to browse through.' Cheryl laid them on the locker beside the bed.

'Thanks. I was getting bored to death. Lee said you'd be coming to see me today. It was good of you to go to the bother of changing your lunch hour. Sit down on the bed. There are chairs somewhere under the bed, but they're too low.'

'It was no trouble. The boss is pretty good like that and lets us change our lunch hour if we want to go to the hair-dressers or somewhere similar. Well,' she grinned, sitting down on the edge of the bed, trying not to jerk it too much, 'was the party worth all this?'

Jody pulled a face. 'This is just about the story of my life. One mad venture after the other and all ending up a total disaster. Only on the other occasions I've rarely been the one to get hurt. Now, it seems, it's my turn to grasp hold of the rough end of the stick. Serves me right, I guess.'

'What are you going to do now? I mean as regards a job and accommodation?'

'Lee asked me that same question, and all I can say is "don't ask me". It's not the most cheerful prospect to have to look forward to.'

'Well, I'm on the lookout for a flat myself. I'll most probably have found one by the time you're discharged from here. You'll be more than welcome to move in with me until you've made up your mind about what you want to do,' Cheryl offered.

'Thanks, Cheryl. The thought of where I was going to

stay was getting me down, but the real problem is: just what is it I want to do? What is it I want...?' She broke off as her gaze shifted from Cheryl's face to the black-clad figure that could be seen approaching their room through the glass panelling beyond her. 'Oh, no! This is all I need!' she muttered, and Cheryl turned to follow her gaze. 'A nun drooling all over me is something I certainly don't want!'

'Has she been to visit you before?' Cheryl asked, as the nun paused to speak to each of the other three patients.

'Yes, yesterday afternoon,' Jody sighed. 'I pretended I was asleep. I hope she's taken the hint and doesn't come over today.'

'I've somehow got the feeling that she will,' Cheryl said laughingly.

And she did. As she approached, Cheryl slipped off the bed and greeted her, 'Good afternoon, Sister.'

'Cheryl!' the nun exclaimed. 'My dear, it's been a long time since I've seen you. You've grown into quite a young lady, I scarcely recognized you. How are you keeping?'

'I'm fine, thank you, Sister,' Cheryl smiled, and turned to Jody. 'Sister, I'd like you to meet a friend of mine, Jody Linton. Jody, this is Sister Clare who taught me in the Fifth Form at school. She was very strict and not at all drooling, were you, Sister?'

'And not as strict as I might have been. Hello, Jody. I came past yesterday, but if I remember rightly you were asleep.'

Jody was still striving to regain the composure robbed from her by the impact of shock, and was incapable of making any reply. As she met the nun's twinkling eyes she read no hint of reproach but genuine amusement. Cheryl saved Jody's situation by saying quickly: 'Perhaps you might be able to suggest something to help Jody, Sister?'

'I'll certainly help if I can.' The nun sat down on the chair Cheryl drew up for her and Cheryl herself resumed her former position on the edge of the bed. She explained Jody's predicament; that she was searching for a job but didn't foresee much success in securing one because of her lack of qualifications. Sister Clare listened intently and after giving it due thought, she suggested a number of positions, none of which appealed to Jody.

'No.' She shook her head. 'I want a worthwhile job where I might be of some use to someone — a hard, challenging job that will take up every scrap of my attention, energy and time. I want to feel that I'm living for a purpose and not just merely — existing. . . .' She trailed off, becoming less confident and rather embarrassed at encountering the nun's speculative gaze. What was she thinking? Jody wondered, shifting uncomfortably. She guessed that behind her cheerful, smiling face there ticked a sapient brain. There would need to be to keep up with a full class of teenage girls, year in, year out, for the major part of her life. Not much would be able to pass by unnoticed. Did she, then, suspect her reason, or part of it anyway, for wishing to secure a job in which she would become completely absorbed? Did she guess that part of her reason was — a man?

'Well,' Jody shrugged carelessly, 'I don't suppose you can suggest something like that.'

'On the contrary,' Sister replied. 'Mother Gabriel employs for the Convent a laywoman to take charge of our kindergarten section of the school as there are not enough nuns to cope. (We have an acute shortage of teachers). Well, it so happens that the woman whom we have at the moment is leaving shortly to go overseas. If you are fond of young children, then perhaps this position would appeal to you?'

Jody could do little but stare. Kids! She had difficulty in curbing her overwhelming impulse to laugh at the mere idea. What on earth did she know about kids? And kindergarten kids at that!

‘Well, what do you say?’ Cheryl prodded eagerly. ‘I think it sounds a great idea.’

‘You would,’ Jody thought, finding it easy to mentally visualize Cheryl with a horde of children hanging on to her skirt. When she replaced Cheryl’s picture with an image of herself, she shuddered. At last: ‘I have had no experience with — children.’

‘You could learn,’ Cheryl retorted. ‘Couldn’t she, Sister?’

‘Definitely,’ Sister nodded, her twinkling eyes fixed on Jody. ‘Probably reading every thought in my head,’ Jody thought.

‘It’s not a kindergarten in the accepted sense but more of a day nursery for under school-age children whose mothers are part-time workers. I have every confidence that you could manage. Besides, Natalie will be working on for a while longer yet and she will be able to show you the routine. Oh, and there’s a flat too,’ Sister said, remembering. ‘Right next door to the compound. It’s cosy and comfortable. That would be the question of accommodation done away with. It’s big enough for two if you wanted a friend to share it with you.’

Jody’s eyes brightened and they alighted on Cheryl. ‘Well, how about it, Cheryl? The school is pretty close to town, isn’t it?’

‘It is,’ Cheryl laughed. ‘But you haven’t yet said you’ll take the job.’

Jody hesitated, but only for a second. ‘I’d like to give it a try, Sister,’ she said, turning to the nun. ‘I give you my promise to do my best. It sounds a challenging proposition

and it will certainly take up all my undivided attention and energy.'

'There's no doubt about that,' Sister Clare agreed, standing up. 'I'll talk this over with Mother Gabriel tonight and come and visit you again at about four tomorrow.'

'Do you think . . . ?' Jody began, suddenly anxious.

'I'm sure Mother Gabriel will be delighted. When you're well perhaps Cheryl will bring you around to the Convent to meet her.'

'I'll do that,' Cheryl agreed. 'You'll like her,' she told Jody. 'She's a honey.'

Cheryl was right. Jody did like Mother Gabriel and she was a honey, and even a bit of a hardcase. She also liked the Convent, which had before, whenever she had had the occasion to pass by it, often impressed her as being oppressive and eerie. It was a huge building made of red brick and had obviously been built with its future purpose in mind, for crosses were affixed in upright positions to either end of its peaked roof. Also there were tiny built-in alcoves which were occupied by statues of saints, not many of whom Jody could put a name to. Realizing her own lack of interest in any form of religion in the past and the way in which the stone statues seemed to be smiling down directly at her made her feel a trifle disconcerted.

The Convent itself was surrounded by well-kept and expensive grounds. They were beautiful, and so too was the tree-lined driveway leading into them, all contributing to produce an atmosphere of dreamy tranquillity.

Despite its venerable outside appearance, the interior of the Convent and its character made a surprising contrast. It was quiet except for the burr of subdued voices and muffled sounds of rubber-soled shoes on the highly waxed floors.

And it was not only the floors that were highly polished. Everything was shining; the windows, door handles, wall panellings and furniture and the air smelled pleasantly of perfumed polishes. Neither did it possess the dull gloom which Jody had fully expected to be greeted with. The sun flowed unrestricted through windows and the many glass doors which opened out on to a concrete patio overlooking the gardens.

The atmosphere, too, struck her as being entirely opposite to what she had imagined. It was easy and unrestrained. And the nuns who had passed them, always hurrying, as she and Cheryl had stood waiting for Mother Gabriel, surprised her by their warm smiles at them and their overall aura of contentment. Although she herself was positive that living an existence such as this would be more than enough to drive her silly, she felt more at ease than she had felt since before that disastrous party out at Riverview.

'I think I'm going to like it here,' she had whispered to Cheryl, and because she was unwise in momentarily forgetting Adam and the fact that her heart had a mind of its own, she did, for a while, find the peace and the sense of fulfilment she had been seeking!

CHAPTER EIGHT

WITH Natalie Forbes' help, Jody soon gained the confidence in which she was sadly deficient when it came to knowing how to go about associating with children from the ages of two to five. She had never before experienced any difficulty in getting acquainted with people of her own age and older, but with these toddlers she felt extremely awkward and out of place. However, she made careful note of Natalie's tactics and memorized them, knowing that they would certainly prove useful to her.

It didn't take her long to wake up to the fact that the children, young as they might be, were surprisingly smart and quick on the uptake for their age. Quite often, early in the afternoon when all the children had been collected by their mothers, she went over to the primary section of the school to help Sister Maria with her large class of beginners. Their ages ranged from five to seven and they were, the boys especially, the noisiest, cheekiest, back-chatting, mutinous little critters that, Jody was sure, ever existed.

The first weeks passed fairly rapidly and she found that the work was absorbing and demanding and that it also completely exhausted her supply of energy. It was all and more than she had bargained for and she was now thankful that she had invited Cheryl to move in to share the flat with her after Natalie had left.

'I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have someone to talk to,' she confided in Cheryl one night.

Cheryl laughed. 'Are you telling me that those kids are insane?'

'No, but *I* soon will be,' Jody responded gloomily.

Cheryl was silent for a while and then: 'Are you finding that you don't like the job after all?'

Jody hesitated. 'It's not that I don't like it — I do, but . . .' she gestured helplessly. 'I get exhausted mentally, I think, long before I do physically. Trying to talk to kids, no matter how smart they are, takes quite a bit of brain-power. For me, at any rate. I can't just talk to them as I'm talking to you now, about everyday occurrences such as what happened at work, girl-friends, boy-friends, world events, politics — just anything and everything in general. I have to tax my brain for ideas to keep them amused. Think up original games and stories, talk with them at their own level and be able to keep it up so that they won't get bored and grizzly. They're cute kids really, but fair go, they get me so that I'm nearly dancing with irritation. The idea of having any of my own . . .' she trailed off and gave an expressive shudder.

'Oh, come on, they can't be all that bad!' Cheryl said.

Jody shrugged. 'Maybe not, but I'll never have any of my own, and perhaps it's just as well. I'd probably drown them. Let's face it, I'm just not the self-sacrificing type,' she said broodily.

Slipping into a world of her own, she wondered whether Adam and Shona were officially engaged yet — or maybe even married. Either way, she had read nothing about it in the newspaper.

Adam would like children, of that she was positive. As for Shona — well, she would be right at home with a whole tribe of them. If anything, their excessive screaming and yelling and exuberance would not send her mad with impatience and exhaustion like it did Jody, but instead would succeed in only strengthening her own supply of vitality. Perhaps it

was for the best then that Adam was going to be, if not already, married to her, Jody thought.

Then she tried to imagine what their children would look like — the boys, dark and black-haired like Adam himself, and the girls, fair and blue-eyed like Shona, and owners of sweet, clean angelic faces. For devilment, she conjured up pictures of how she imagined her own to look. Not in the least bit clean or angelic, she thought, with masses of black or tawny hair and with eyes, hazel or grey-blue, just as cheekily mischievous as their smiling, grubby faces. She smiled to herself and quite suddenly the idea didn't strike her as being at all aversive or one to shy away from. Then as she jerked herself into a more logical frame of mind, her smile faded. 'It must be those kids,' she told herself. 'Nightmares. It'll be hallucinations next!'

She sighed. 'You know,' she said to Cheryl, rambling on without giving much thought to what she was saying, 'looking into the future it's not difficult to predict what it holds in store for me. Judging by the existence I see, I might just as well enter the Convent!' It was a rash statement which surprised herself as well as Cheryl. And what surprised her even more was the way in which the idea took on and began to appeal to her as soon as she had uttered it. She sat up, uncurling from her relaxed position on the settee.

Cheryl had laughed at this, what she considered to be another of Jody's wild ramblings and schemes. She had occasional fits of coming up with the craziest, most unexpected things that Cheryl soon learned not to take her seriously. However, at looking up from the garment she was knitting and seeing the set look of purpose on Jody's face, she gasped incredulously: 'You're not serious!'

'Of course I'm serious!' Jody retorted with conviction.

'I think it sounds a great idea — even though I do say so myself.'

Cheryl paused in her knitting, the stunned amazement being quickly replaced by a display of extreme irritation which, coming from the usually placid, unruffled Cheryl surprised Jody. 'You really are suffering from derangement, aren't you? You can't just pack up and enter a convent simply because you think it sounds "a great idea"!' she snapped.

'I know that.'

'Then stop talking through that hole in your head and . . .'

'Cheryl, I'm not acting the fool. I mean it!'

Cheryl stared at her intently for some time, then, taking a deep breath, she spoke in her normal quiet manner. 'Jody, believe me, you don't know what you're saying. Maybe it's because you're bored and not getting out and about as much as you're used to. Why don't you find a hobby or an interest of some sort? Find something to do in the evenings that will take your mind off your work. Can you knit?'

Several seconds ticked by before the suggestion penetrated and was grasped by the dumbfounded Jody. Then the explosion came. 'Knit!' she shrieked. '*Knit!*' Jumping to her feet, she lifted her arms up above her head in a gesture which begged: 'Give me strength!'

She turned the television off and came over to confront her friend, holding back her impatience with commendable effort. 'If watching you,' she said deliberately, 'sitting there click-clacking with those damn needles all night is slowly driving me around the bend, imagine what doing it myself would do to me!'

Cheryl blinked at Jody's menacing face, then burst out laughing and laughed until tears came to her eyes.

‘Well, I thought all my wit had been sucked dry by those kids,’ Jody said. ‘It’s a relief to find I was wrong. What is it I’ve said that’s so funny?’

At last, when Cheryl was able to speak, ‘You know that when girls enter the Convent, they have to make all kinds of vows and promises, among them being vows of patience and obedience, and the picture of you blowing up like that every time you were given an order to do something which rankled and didn’t meet with your likes and dislikes is a hilarious one. You’d be as much at home in that Convent as would a tank of gelignite — and you’d probably prove to be just as, if not more, highly explosive.’

Jody continued to glower and then, unable to help herself, she joined in Cheryl’s laughter. ‘I guess the idea was rather way out,’ she agreed, slumping down into an armchair, her back resting against one arm and her slack-clad legs swinging over the other. ‘Still, I’ve always liked way out ideas. You really think it would be hopeless, then?’

‘It’s not for me to say that the idea is hopeless, ridiculous or anything else, really,’ said Cheryl, resuming her knitting. ‘But there’s a lot more involved than just saying: “I’m going to enter the Convent,” and enter. You’ll need to learn all about our religion, take instruction and finally become baptized, confirmed, etcetera — if you’re not already. That in itself takes time. Then you’ll have to make up your mind which order you want to enter. If it’s this one and you want to teach, you’ll have to first get all the qualifications required to become a teacher — a lengthy and expensive operation. Even after having accomplished all that, one can’t become a nun overnight — you’ll spend some years as a novice at the convent down in Wellington. By the end of that time you should know whether or not you want to carry on with it and become a nun.’

Jody's expression was rapidly becoming gloomier and gloomier. 'Well, I guess there'd be one compensation.'

'What's that?'

'By the time I did eventually become a nun, I'd be so old that my explosive powers wouldn't be up to matching even a drop of gelignite, let alone a tank!'

Cheryl laughed. 'Look, why don't you talk it over with Mother Gabriel? She'd be delighted to advise you.'

Jody shook her head. 'As I said, it was a way-out idea. I'm just not cut out for the self-sacrificial bit. I don't know what ever made me suggest it. Those kids must be giving it me worse than I thought.' She sighed. 'Besides, Mother Gabriel would only repeat what you've already told me. Wouldn't she?'

'She'd be far more obtuse than I was,' was Cheryl's ambiguous reply.

'What do you mean?' Jody twisted her head to look at her.

'She'd probably guess your true reason for wanting to enter and come straight to the point and say: 'The Convent is for those who are really convinced they have a vocation and not for broken-hearted young girls who want to use it as a means of escape; to get away from facing up to the harsh, cold reality of the outside world.'

In a flash, Jody was in an upright position on her chair. Her face was pale and her eyes hard and diamond-bright. 'Just what do you think you know?' she scorned.

'Wasn't that your basic reason?'

'No!'

Cheryl shrugged. 'Then I'm sorry. It was only an impression I got. A stab in the dark, that's all.'

Jody clamped her lips together and with arms folded, she swung back into her inelegant position. Deep down she

knew that what Cheryl had said was true, or at least partly true. She would never marry, of that she had no doubt, and by entering the Convent, there at least she would belong and have a worthwhile reason for living. Sister Clare was often saying how much they were praying for vocations. And if the teaching profession wasn't one that appealed to her, then there were other orders she could join where she would be equally useful. However, she was aware that she would have to stop kidding herself and admit that her idea would, and could, never eventuate into anything more. All the same, she was determined to give it very serious thought before abandoning it entirely.

'If you don't fancy knitting then you ought to get out a bit more; to the movies or somewhere,' Cheryl was saying.

Jody maintained a stubborn silence. 'Clickety-clack, clickety-clack' was the rhythm beating in her head as she listened to those infernal needles.

'A gang of us from the office are going to a party this coming week-end. Would you like to come along?' Cheryl went on.

'I'm sick of parties!'

'There's going to be a surplus of men, I was told. I could arrange a date for you.'

'And I'm heartily sick of men!' Jody reached for the uncomfortable cushion behind her back and threw it forcefully on to the floor. 'And stop humouring me as if I were a child!' she snapped, at the same time knowing that she was behaving in a juvenile fashion.

'Who is he? This guy you're eating your heart out for?'

'Still stabbing in the dark, I see.'

'I don't think so. What happened, Jody? Was he no good? It's usually the way. They're not worth it. . . .'

'He isn't no good!' Jody cut in. 'I'm the one who's no

good, and I didn't need him to tell me that.'

The needles stopped clicking and Cheryl put aside her knitting. 'Tell me about it,' she urged. 'You'll feel better when you've got it off your chest, and tomorrow those holy terrors won't seem half so bad.'

'And I'll be seeing haloes instead of horns?' Jody gave a feeble laugh. 'I'm sorry for being so moody, Cheryl. I'm not very bright company for you, am I?' Hesitantly, she poured out the whole story, and as Cheryl had said, she did begin to feel a lot better. 'It's been nearly three months since I left Riverview and last saw Adam, and it's been like an eternity. What will the next three years be like? Hell on earth.'

'Jody,' Cheryl reached out a sympathetic hand, 'there'll be someone else. There always is.'

Jody shook her head. 'Don't you see? He's the only person I've ever had any scrap of feeling for, and through him I've learned a tremendous amount. There may be someone else one day,' she shrugged. 'Who knows? All I know is that I'll never feel for him what I feel for Adam.' Abruptly, she got up and switched the television back on. 'I'll make some coffee,' she said over her shoulder, and disappeared into the kitchen.

This side of Jody that Cheryl had suddenly stumbled upon was so out of character that it left her practically speechless. Who was she to advise anyone on these matters of which she herself had had no experience? She could offer her opinion, of course. But she was at a complete loss when it came to knowing how to tackle the task of giving an opinion to someone as complex as Jody.

By the time the following Saturday arrived, Cheryl had managed to persuade Jody to go with her to the party being

put on by a member of the insurance office staff, and her flatmates.

'It will be fun,' Cheryl had urged. 'And it won't be one of those beer parties, thrown open to just anyone and everyone, like you're afraid of. There'll be games, dancing and sensible discussions and only those invited will be allowed in. You'll enjoy it, I promise. They're a good crowd at the office.'

To please Cheryl and for the sake of peace and quiet, Jody relented and gave in. 'Why not?' she thought. '“Dancing” to records, playing silly games and sitting around talking a load of stupid rubbish couldn't be any worse than mooning around here talking to myself.'

The two boys who called to take them to the party were, Jody had to admit, a great improvement on the last two who had called for her and Lee at the girls' hostel — and so was the car. Cheryl introduced them by their Christian names as Corcy and Alec, and it was Alec Jody soon found herself coupled with — not that she minded. He was, and for that matter so was Corey, charming, full of brash self-confidence, and both promised to be good fun.

Also, Jody found it a very pleasant change to be in the company of a boy who was clean, handsome and smelled of a subtle aftershave and whose hair was not greasy and covering his collar. And instead of scruffy jeans, shirt and over-jacket, he wore casual, well-pressed slacks, a tan skivvy and a cream V-neck cardigan.

They were both smooth conversationalists and often, in jest, exchanged snide but smart remarks, each trying to outdo the other. Jody was relieved to realize that perhaps the party wasn't going to be quite the ordeal she had anticipated and that she was going to find it easy to reciprocate and join in with them in their brand of fun.

All at once she was extremely thankful that she had taken particular care and time over her appearance. It had been with detached interest, but the results had merited a genuine stream of compliments from Cheryl. She had styled her hair up so that the long, dangling earrings she wore would be unhidden and displayed to advantage. They were ridiculous things made of some type of metal, the surface rugged and left unpainted. Each one consisted of an array of odd, undefinable shapes, entangled and looped together. It was another of the impulsive buys Jody was famous for. When she had seen them she had thought them the weirdest and most hideous items of 'jewellery' she had ever laid eyes on, but oh, how well they would go with her crazily patterned culotte.

By the time the party was half over, she was glad she had come. Never before had she enjoyed herself to such an extent. Cheryl was right, the crowd from her office and their friends was a good one, and she envied her. It was true that the games were silly, but to both the observers and participants, they were also hilarious and more often than not, Jody found herself in the role of the participant, for with Cheryl's volunteered information, her reckless spirit and 'I'll try anything once' attitude were soon made known. However, she didn't really mind, for she found it more exciting and fun-rewarding to play the part rather than to observe someone else.

The 'dancing' to records which she had privately visualized as being jostled about in an overcrowded, dimly lit room, to the beat of blaring pop tunes and clasped too close to a partner who had had a little too much to drink, turned out to be not as she envisaged at all. While some couples danced easily to a not too high volume of music, others sat talking or helped prepare supper.

Supper, also, was another pleasant addition to the changes she had so far experienced. At most of the parties she had attended before, supper had been unheard-of. Mentally, she baulked at the thought. There had been heartbreaking messes as it was, made by broken glass and a conglomeration of beer bottles, alcohol spilt over floors, furniture and wallpaper and cigarette butts and ashes ground into the pile of expensive carpets. Goodness knows what damages the introduction of food would have produced!

As it was, here, everyone verbally appreciated the trouble Glenda and her flatmates had obviously gone to in cooking the savouries, cream-filled sponges and preparing the club sandwiches and cream and shrimp-topped snacks.

It was the sight of the perfect, quickly consumed Pavlova, covered with cream and sliced Chinese gooseberries, that caused a light to go out and dull Jody's evening. She remembered back to her own pathetic attempt, and regardless of the time lapse, each detail was still etched as vividly in her mind as if it had been only yesterday.

'Enjoying yourself?' Cheryl asked, tucking into the creamy mass on her plate with a fork. 'Have some Pav. It's gorgeous — and terribly fattening. Glenda shouldn't be such a good cook.'

Jody shook her head.

'You're not enjoying yourself?' said Cheryl, astounded. 'Well, you can certainly put on a top-rate performance!'

'No, I mean I don't like Pavlova. In fact I hate it. I wish you wouldn't sit there gorging it in front of me. It's turning my stomach,' Jody grumbled. She hadn't given a thought to Adam and Riverview all that evening and had, until then, been so enjoying herself, looking forward immensely to the stroll home suggested by Alec.

'I'm sorry,' Cheryl shrugged cheerfully, not at all put

out. She slid her plate back on to the low coffee table around which everyone was sitting, chatting amongst themselves. 'I shouldn't eat it anyway. It's just that I can't resist it. Why should such a delicious thing have to pile on the pounds and always give me a toothache?' She sucked in her cheeks and closed her eyes until the pain in her tooth, caused by the sweet meringue, subsided. 'How do you like . . .?' she nodded towards Alec, who was sitting beside Jody but deeply engrossed in a conversation with another youth on the other side of him.

'Nice,' Jody nodded. 'Good fun.'

'That's good. Actually he was dead set against taking you — now don't get me wrong,' Cheryl added quickly at seeing her friend's indignant expression. 'As you can imagine, he's never lacking in girl-friends, but he just isn't the type to get serious,' she explained. 'All he wants is a good time and no ties, so he seldom takes a girl out for more than a month — or two at the most. Naturally, whenever a girl at the office has a friend who is looking for a date, or she and her own boy-friend suggests making a foursome, it's always Alec they drag in to partner the other girl. Unfortunately, the girl seldom turns out to be the type he himself would have chosen. Instead of looking for a good time with no strings attached like he is, they often are inclined to be the clinging, possessive type, or want to become too serious too quickly — you know the sort of thing. So not very long ago he pulled no punches in letting everyone know that for him, blind dates were out!'

'Well, how very flattering!' Jody remarked, stiffening. 'What did you have to do to get him to agree to partner me? Bribe him? Threaten him? Or did you all hold him down in the strong-room and apply torture tactics to which he would sooner or later have to succumb?'

'Don't be silly!' Cheryl said impatiently, wanting to kick herself for being so tactless and for not remembering Jody's sensitive pride and her amazing gift for jumping to the wrong conclusion. 'I admit that at first we all had to work him over, but the only reason I'm telling you this is because he told me a while ago that I was his friend for life and that if all my unattached girl-friends were like you, then I was to make out a list. *And* he gave me a smacking kiss on my cheek. I also believe you agreed to let him walk you home,' she added, discreetly watching for Jody's reaction.

Jody remained vexed and silent. Then: 'For one thing, I don't believe you, and for another I only agreed to let him walk me home for the pure and simple reason that I had gathered that you and Corey would prefer it if the two of us weren't around.'

'Oh, yes? Anyway,' Cheryl lifted her shoulders, 'one way or the other, it doesn't really matter now, does it?'

Jody darted her a questioning glance.

'Well, it's raining. Haven't you heard it? It's been pelt-ing down in torrents for the past half hour.'

'Oh, no!' Vexation fled and dismay took over. Jody listened intently and managed to hear the clatter of rain against the iron roof above the sound of the record player and the murmur of everyone's individual conversations. 'But there wasn't a cloud in the sky earlier and it's been a glorious day.'

Cheryl laughed. 'Surely you don't need me to tell you that this is Palmerston, where we can freeze in summer and sunbathe in winter. If ever there was a temperamental climate, then we've got it. So that's your stroll home in the moonlight ruled out for tonight. But cheer up. If you're lucky, and I for one think that your luck is in, Alec might

do the thing he's been unknown to do for a long while, and that is to ask you out again. You've managed to score quite a hit with him. Wouldn't I laugh if suddenly he found that the tables were being turned on him!

'Oh, get lost!' Jody advised sourly in response to her amused teasing. Angrily, she made to get to her feet and Alec's head swung around like a flash.

'Hey, where are you off to?' he protested, his hand closing about her wrist.

All at once her high spirits ebbed away and responding to sheer habit, she gave vent to the surge of recklessness which assailed her. 'To stand on my head in the middle of the Square in hope that what brains I might have in my feet will transport themselves to my head!' She pulled her wrist free with a sharp twist.

'Eh?' Alec was clearly dumbfounded.

'You heard me! Good night!'

'Jody!' She heard Cheryl's voice and was aware of all the interest she was creating as she stalked out of the room. Bess had said that she wanted attention, demanded it and would behave shamelessly in order to obtain it, but on those other occasions she had revelled in it. It had thrilled her to shock people. On this particular occasion, however, she felt no pleasure. The pleasure had already been awarded to her when she had taken part in those ridiculous games earlier on and it had been a kind entirely different from that she had known so many times previously. With something akin to astonishment, she knew it was one she preferred and now she had lost all hope of ever securing it. 'It's too late,' she thought. 'They accepted me, made me welcome, and now I've thrown it all away — back in their faces. I can't change, and I hate myself. Roseann was right, I am self-destructive. I'm destroying all my chances of being happy

and carefree like Cheryl, Glenda and all the others.'

'Jody!' She heard the door through which she had passed from the lounge to the kitchen close and almost simultaneously Alec's hands were on her shoulders, whirling her around to face him. 'Just where do you think you're going?'

She stood rigid after her efforts to shrug his hands off failed. 'I told you!' she glared through a long strand of gold-brown hair which had fallen free from its swept-up style. 'Now let go!'

'It's teeming out there!'

'So? What's a little rain? It's never killed anybody to my knowledge!'

'Look, stop behaving like a termagant and raving on about this business of standing on your head in the middle of the Square and tell me what's bugging you?'

'You are, if you must know!' Her earrings swung against her neck as, irritated, she tried to shake back the hair from her eyes. How on earth did she ever endure that fringe she had once which straggled down into her eyes?

'Me? What did I do?' Alec's lazy eyes widened and he came close to gaping in his hurt bewilderment.

Jody felt his fingers loosen their hold on her shoulders and swiftly she wriggled, and was free. 'Never in my whole life have I been in the humiliating position where a guy has had to be "worked over" and bulldozed into agreeing to take me out!'

Understanding dawned and colour darkened Alec's face.

'I hope the evening hasn't proved to be too much of an ordeal for you. You'll be thankful to know that you won't be forced into taking me home. A walk in the rain is just what I need to cool off!'

Alec reacted swiftly and made it to the door before her. 'Oh, no, you don't. First you're going to listen to what I

have to say.' He repeated exactly what Cheryl had already told her, but she scarcely heard him.

It wasn't because she had discovered that he had been concussed into accompanying her here that made her so irritable and bad-tempered. His position was not an unusual one, nor an unreasonable one. Had she been in his place she would have felt exactly the same way. She understood his reasons and believed his explanation. If it came to that, she had believed Cheryl. It was all because she had let a silly little thing like the sight of a Pavlova catch her unawares, causing her guard to slip and memories to seep in.

She scowled to herself and brushed past Alec to the door. Before her life was through she was bound to come across hundreds of Pavlovas. 'And I'll eat them until I make myself sick!' she shot at Alec, who stood looking more bewildered than ever.

'Eat what?'

'Pavlovas!' She wrenched open the door and headed out into the rain. After a moment's hesitation, Alec was at her side. She heard him mutter something which she would never have expected Alec to utter in feminine company. 'There's no sense in the two of us getting wet. I can get home okay on my own, in fact I prefer to be on my own!'

'Actually I can't see any sense whatsoever in this whole crazy situation! Cheryl warned me that you were mad-cap, but just mad, without the cap, would have been more than an adequate description!' With his hands in his pockets and his shoulders slightly hunched, he slouched along beside her. 'And neither do I care one way or the other if you can get home on your own, whether you get home at all, the method of transport you choose to take or what weather conditions you fancy to travel under. The only thing I care about is hearing you say that you understand my point of

view and believe what I've just told you and that you're not annoyed,' he finished, and drew in the breath he badly needed but hadn't paused to take.

'I understand and believe you. And I wasn't really annoyed,' Jody recited like a programmed robot.

'And *mean* it!'

'I mean it!'

Alec huffed in exasperation. 'Are you being serious?'

'Of course.'

'Then what, in heaven's name, are we doing, splashing around in the rain?' he exploded, stopping in his tracks.

'I like the rain!' Jody shouted back, stopping too.

Both stood soaked to the skin, Alec's hair flat against his scalp and Jody's nearing the same condition, glaring at each other. 'Then why did you carry on like that back there in the first place, if you weren't annoyed?' he asked, more quietly, his exasperation rigorously disciplined.

She shrugged and dropped her gaze. 'I don't know,' she mumbled. How could she tell him about that wretched Pavlova?

'Oh, I see it. You like stalking out on a guy, happily flinging accusations this way and that, making it necessary for him to wallow through a horde of explanations which you already knew and didn't give a hoot; and making wild statements about Pavlovas, head or tail of which neither side could possibly comprehend, to go puddle-paddling in the pouring rain!'

'Oh, stop yelling at me!' Jody cried, putting her hands up to cover her ears and shaking her head. 'Always shouting! You're just like him!'

'Who?'

'Never mind! Oh, Alec, I am sorry.' Abruptly, her voice lowered and all signs of contumely faded. She even became

humble. 'Look at us, all wet!'

'What did you expect? Sunburn?'

'Won't you forgive me?' she asked in a small voice, peeping at him through the raindrops tipping her lashes.

Alec sighed. 'It's all right, Jody. It's just that I'm so used to dealing with rational, normal everyday people like myself, that I was floundering for a while. I believe that people like yourself can't be held responsible for their actions. It's a pity, because I'd like to wring your stupid little neck!' he ended gratingly.

Because it had become such a firmly established practice, Jody searched for some swift comeback, but her mind went blank. She swallowed, feeling small, beaten and very unsure of herself — and him. It was a feeling so often alien to her and she could do nothing but gesture helplessly. 'I suppose the others would like to as well.'

Alec relented and went over to her. He slipped his warm but wet arm around her. 'Of course not. Why should they?'

'After the disgraceful way I behaved and just walked out; why shouldn't they?'

He tightened his arm. 'They have no idea what was going on. They were all too busy yakking amongst themselves. When you walked out they all thought we were fooling. They all know that I'm a sarcastic brute and so, naturally, expect you to retaliate.'

'You mean they don't think I'm a rude, bad-mannered . . . I am a bitch, though — no, seriously, I am. Don't you think I am?'

The laughter continued in his voice: 'The others back there like you, and I doubt whether they'd agree. And I like you too, and I certainly don't agree.'

Jody looked up at him, her wet face aglow. 'You — you really mean that? You really do like me?'

He bent and kissed her. 'Convinced?' he murmured.

She nodded mutely.

'Happy now?'

Happy? She smiled. What else was this sensation of lightheadedness? She nodded. 'And to prove it, I'm going to stand on my head in the middle of the Square!' she announced and with a laugh, she bounded away from him.

'Oh no!' Alec groaned in desperation.

'Oh, come on! We're wet now, we couldn't possibly get any wetter even if we jumped into the pond. Say, that's an idea!'

'Oh, no! Oh, no, you don't!' Immediately he began to run after her and it was more in the form of a restraint rather than a friendship that he took firm possession of her hand.

'People think we're mad,' she whispered to him when they had reached the Square and were crossing the street, pausing midway to wait for the busy Saturday night traffic. Rain was still thick and heavy and deliciously warm. She could feel the warmth rising up from the black, shiny surface of the road which had captured and held the heat from the sun's rays throughout the day.

'They wouldn't be far wrong,' Alec rejoined dryly.

'Oh, I don't know. Personally, I'm enjoying myself. Aren't you?'

'Oh, sure.'

'Well, I bet we're having more fun than they are in their cars, dashing in and out of them, trying to avoid getting wet and inevitably end up getting uncomfortably damp and cranky into the bargain. Come on, let's scoot through here.' She darted through the line of cars which had stopped at the traffic lights and in doing so freeing her hand from Alec's.

Balancing her body by spreading out her arms, she ran over the uneven surface of a long line of rocks edging the gardens; under the trees and across the stretch of velvet-smooth grass and up on to the concrete ledge surrounding the pond. Lights shone up under the water and the six gently playing fountains were lit up and sparkled like crystal sprays.

'If you jump in, I'll make damn sure that you don't get out,' Alec warned from his position on the bridge crossing the pond.

'Do you really think I'd jump in and ruin my best culotte?' Jody retorted with mock indignation.

'After tonight, nothing you do would surprise me.'

'Right, let's go. Next stop the clock tower.'

'What on earth for?' Alec demanded when they stood, waiting on the kerb of the road for the steady flow of traffic to pass by.

'You'll see.'

Once they had crossed the road they embarked upon the section of land through which had run the railway some years ago and had since been converted into garden plots and lengths of rolling green lawn with trees and many shaped and frequently trimmed bushes.

'Now I'll show you. It will have to be on the grass, it won't be as hard as the concrete.'

'You're not going to . . .'

'You didn't really believe I would, did you?' Jody knelt and resting her head on the ground kicked her legs up into the air until she was in an upright posture. 'How's that?' she asked.

'Remarkable,' came the reply.

For one dreadful moment stars seemed to explode before her eyes, and the illusion wasn't caused by the blood rush-

ing to her head. That hadn't been Alec's voice. She blinked a couple of times to get her rain-blurred eyes into focus. Those shoes — and those slacks, she could see, weren't Alec's either. Her concentration and attention swerved from the task of maintaining her pose and she fell, landing with a thump on her back. The air was cruelly knocked from her and she lay there struggling painfully for breath. With a moan, she clasped her arms across her stomach and rolled on her side, bringing up her knees.

At once she heard the sound of footsteps on the concrete, but they stopped suddenly. She hadn't dreamed it. She had actually heard Adam's voice, and those footsteps had been Alec's. He had made the attempt to help her and had been stopped. 'And by Adam, no doubt,' she thought, her mind no longer dazed but stark clear.

At that instant she wanted to run. Just get to her feet and run, not be compelled to face him and see that tolerant, waiting look in his eyes, eyes totally devoid of any hint that he was surprised. 'Nothing I do could surprise him, either,' she thought dismally as she got to her feet and turned around.

'H-hi,' she greeted him, absurdly waving a hand. 'Oh, ground, open and swallow me up!' she wished as she received no response whatsoever. Her heart galloping, she watched despairingly as his gaze travelled over her hair, half loose and half still pinned into place and flattened sleekly by the rain. It rested for a moment on her earrings and she saw a corner of his mouth flicker disparagingly. Then slowly it slipped down the length of her in her crazily patterned silk culotte, no longer baggy and flowing but wet and plastered to the outline of her figure.

She suffered his scrutiny, nervously twisting her hands together and blinking her eyelashes heavily laden with rain-

drops which were not replaced by more as the rain had begun to slacken.

At last he nodded slowly. 'I thought it was you, darting in and out amongst the traffic, hopping over rock gardens, dancing about on the side of the pond and now,' he indicated to the grass with his hand, 'standing on your head in the centre of the Square, all in the pouring rain. Who else could it have been?'

Jody lifted her chin and opened her mouth to reiterate when he calmly turned away from her to Alec, who was standing awkwardly looking on, uncertain whether or not he should intervene. 'You're Jody's escort, I presume?' in his most uncompromising tone.

'Yes, sir.'

'Leave Alec out of this!' Jody butted in.

'Be quiet, Jody!' He went on speaking to Alec. 'I'm well aware that Jody has no brains or common sense to speak of, and if you've agreed to take her out you surely must have realized that too, and also that you're responsible for her?'

'Alec doesn't have to answer to you!' Jody burst out, unable to contain herself. 'And just for the record, neither do I. All this was my idea!'

'Naturally. I never, for a moment, imagined otherwise. What sane human being would ever be capable of thinking up, not to mention carrying out, any of the harebrained schemes that you're so expert at coming up with?'

'It wasn't a harebrained scheme and I'm not demented!' she contradicted. 'We were simply having a bit of fun. Surely we're entitled to enjoy ourselves in our own way without everyone concluding that we're loco?'

Adam gave a resigned shrug and dismissed the subject. 'Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?'

With a toss of her head, a movement she intended to be

dignified but which appeared absurd under the circumstances, she said: 'This is Alec' then floundered, wishing wildly that there was something available she could hurl at Adam's face and wipe away its polite quizzical expression which told her that he suspected all along that she hadn't the faintest idea of Alec's surname.

Quickly, Alec interposed, 'My name is Alec Johnson. We had a car available to run us home at the end of the evening. It was sheer bad luck that we got caught in the rain before then. Well, it was impossible for us to get much wetter, so we decided to walk.'

'Judging by the direction in which you're heading I gather that you are no longer living at the hostel?' Adam addressed Jody once again.

'You gather right. I'm flatting.'

'I thought that you might have contacted either Bess or myself, written and let us know how you were getting on, where you were working, etcetera.'

Where she was working! Not on her dear sweet life was she going to give him the opportunity of indulging in a laugh at her expense. Telling him where she worked would be like handing it to him on a silver platter. She shook her head, brushing away a few stray drops of rain from her cheek with the palm of her hand. 'Let's not delude ourselves. None of us would welcome reminders, whether of the tragic way by which I entered into the lives of the Slades, or of all that went after.' There was conviction in her tone, she saw to that, but her eyes were reluctant to meet his for fear they might betray her true feelings. Already the pulses stirring within her were giving her away.

'Is that what you really believe or want to believe?'

She tore her gaze from the rain sparkling on his black hair and the dark, rugged contours of his face and with an

effort, replied steadily: 'It's the truth. Good night. Adam — and good-bye. Coming, Alec?'

To her annoyance Alec did not follow her immediately and when she looked back over her shoulder she saw that he and Adam were exchanging a few words. 'What were you saying?' she demanded to know when Alec caught up with her.

Alec grinned. 'He more or less told me to look after you better in the future — or else. And by looking after you better, he meant enforcing a firm hand — and that you needed it.'

'The dictating, interfering . . . ! Just who does he think he is?'

'You tell me,' Alec suggested.

'What did you tell him? Where to go, I hope.'

'No. I agreed.'

'Agreed?' she gasped.

'And wholeheartedly.'

'You traitor!'

Alec merely laughed. 'You caught me on the hop tonight, but in future I'll see to it that you toe the line.'

'*You'll* see to it that I. . . . Aren't you getting a little ahead of yourself?' Jody inquired, cooling down. 'Nobody ever tells me what to do or how I should toe the line.'

'Except, perhaps, Adam whatever-his-name-is?'

'No, not him! Especially not him! And his name is Adam Slade.'

'Adam Slade,' Alec repeated thoughtfully. 'Is he the guy I'm supposed to take after?'

'Take after? Now what are you on about?'

'A while ago you told me to stop shouting and that I was just like "him". Remember?'

Jody remained silent.

'Well, I'm not, you know. Perhaps in some respects. For instance, I can administer a firm hand — but I can't take to Pavlova at all.'

She stopped dead, stunned at the disconcerting accuracy of what he had apparently perceived, then, her temper simmering, she stalked on, ignoring him until they reached her flat.

'You like this guy a fair amount, don't you?' he asked as she turned to bid him a curt good night.

She took a deep breath. 'In spells. Though spells of utter loathing are more frequent.'

'Mmmm,' was all he commented on the subject. 'Can I see you again?'

'You're game if you are willing to take the risk. I'm jinxed, or hadn't you noticed? It doesn't take very long before everyone who comes into contact with me wishes they hadn't.'

'You want a good time, don't you? Well, so do I. Now I know, regardless of what you try and make out, that you're struck on this Adam Slade. So while your attentions are well and truly involved in that quarter I won't need to fear that you'll want to get your nails into me, and at the same time, in my redoubtable company, you'll have a chance to forget your unrequited love.'

As she turned without a word, his hand caught her arm and prevented her from entering the dark interior flat. 'Hell, I'm sorry. That was clumsy of me.'

'Not to mention conceited. Whether my attentions happen to be elsewhere engaged or not, what gives you the idea I'd consider your "redoubtable" self such a good catch? And aren't you overlooking one small point, that if I do forget my "unrequited love" I might, improbably as far as I'm concerned but highly possible in your self-opinionated estimation, find my attentions wandering in your direction?'

'Okay, okay, I admit I'm conceited as well as clumsy.' He paused. 'Care to tell me what happened?'

'Nothing *happened*. He's engaged to someone else, that's all.'

'Well, he is a good few years older than you, isn't he?' Alec suggested, not very helpfully.

'And his fiancée has a good few more clues than I have, too. She's also easier to handle, has no delinquent tendencies and is, in most cases, sweet-natured, sweet-tempered, intelligent, attractive, and above all, I think she's the type to adore kids.'

Alec gave a low whistle. 'Some testimonial!'

'Yes, isn't it?' she agreed, her compromise rather forced.

'But not every man . . .' he broke off as the slam of car doors was heard from the drive around on the other side of the flat. 'Hello, sounds like Cheryl and Corey are back, just in time to give me a lift. Listen, when can I see you again? This Friday? I can come by and pick you up about eight.'

'Where will we be going?'

He shrugged. 'We'll think of something.'

'Right.' Impulsively, she put a hand on his arm and reached up to kiss his cheek. 'Thanks for tonight. I'm sorry about getting us wet — and everything.'

'But you enjoyed yourself?'

'Yes. For the first time in a long time.'

He laughed. 'Amazingly enough, so did I. Your peculiar definition of fun must be catching. 'Night, Jody.'

CHAPTER NINE

AS THE following week rapidly drew to an end, so did the limit to Jody's patience. She had long before reached the conclusion that there had to be something called children's intuition. That instinct told them when an adult wasn't at ease with them and enabled them to sense a strained atmosphere. It was such an atmosphere in which she constantly worked, and perhaps even created, battling to keep a taut rein on her temper and frayed nerves.

She tried her best to win their confidence and act naturally with them as she had seen Natalie do, as well as chat to them, keep them occupied and their interest captured, but the increasing draw on her mental resources and imagination which she wasn't accustomed to using was exhausting. In their turn, the younger children became bored and irritable, squabbling perpetually among themselves, and Sister Maria's 'infants', as she called them, were inclined to be disobedient and displayed no respect for her authority when she was left alone with them to organize their games and drill periods. She didn't know which group of children was the most difficult to handle, but she did know that they, and the impending sense that she was soon going to have to admit she was a failure, were two factors beginning to get her down.

On Thursday, proceeding through a highly unsuccessful morning, she finished an hour earlier than her normal time owing to Sister Maria not requiring her assistance with the 'infants'. Greatly relieved to be given the opportunity to spend some time away from the entire school, she changed out of

her nylon overall, slipped on a cool, sleeveless summer frock and decided to stroll into town.

She wandered leisurely from shop to shop, pausing to look at everything that took her eye. By the time half an hour had crept past, she was feeling lazy and void of all tension, both in mind and body.

It was engulfed in this dreamy state that she emerged from a shop and, not looking at anything in particular and especially not where she was going, she collided with a woman laden with bags of what she soon discovered was fruit.

'Oh, I'm terribly sorry!' Jody apologized, hastily bending to retrieve the oranges which people were trying to avoid treading on as they sprawled in all directions over the pavement.

'Jody! It is Jody, isn't it?'

From the shock at hearing Roseann's voice addressing her, Jody almost dropped the armful of oranges she had gathered back on to the pavement again. Already her relaxed disposition had been rudely shattered by the collision, and now, learning that the woman whose oranges she was clutching to her was none other than Roseann, she felt the familiar tautening pull on her nerves.

Straightening, she carried the oranges back to Roseann, at whom she hadn't paused to look before bending to gather the fruit she had knocked to the ground.

'It is Jody! Good heavens, I didn't recognize you for a minute,' Roseann exclaimed.

And neither would Jody have taken Roseann to be the same woman. She was looking near to radiant. Her make-up, hair and style of dress were as impeccable as ever, but that wasn't all. Her face was less haggard than Jody remembered, and she had even put on weight. It suited her, too.

'It's evident,' Jody thought, 'that having got rid of me has agreed with her.' 'Hello, Roseann,' she said aloud.

'Well, you certainly have changed!' Although there was genuine astonishment in her voice there was a note of derision as well, as if she was privately wagering that the change was only an outward one. 'Look,' she went on quickly, 'give me a hand here and help me carry these parcels to the car, then we can have coffee somewhere and a chat.'

'An inquisition would be more like it,' Jody thought dryly, as Roseann pushed several of her parcels into her arms before she had a chance to protest. Resignedly, she followed her to where she had parked her car, bidding farewell to her free, peaceful afternoon.

When the packages had been bundled into the car, Roseann suggested they try the Coffee Garden, a quaint little coffee shop which was often more crowded by its green pot-plants than by customers.

'Well?' Roseann began brightly, once they were both seated at one of the vacant tables.

Remaining silent, Jody broodily sipped her coffee which was bitter and lukewarm. A long time had passed since that day Roseann and Uncle Perry had handed her into the custody of Adam Slade and she had long since ceased to feel as strongly about it as she had done at the time. However, the attitude which Roseann was at present displaying vaguely annoyed her. She was behaving as if that scene in the lounge of her home so many months ago had never taken place or had no particular significance at all and so wasn't worth remembering. 'I suppose by "Well?" you want to know why I'm running around town and not still in the clutches of Adam Slade, slogging my life away on his farm?' she said, the spasm of annoyance subsiding and weary indifference taking its place.

Roseann gave a careless shrug. 'I did wonder, but I suppose Mr. Slade let you go.'

'What? Don't you mean you suspect I escaped and ran away?' Jody couldn't restrain the mocking lilt in her voice.

Roseann's eyes narrowed. 'I did say that you had changed, but I doubted to myself whether it would be anything more than an outward one.'

'Oh, I'm basically the same. Adam was only too glad to let me go in the end.'

'Knowing you, I can well believe that he would be, but then again, knowing him, even for only a short while, I can't believe that he would let you, or anyone, influence his actions in any way. I should imagine that his letting you go was entirely his own decision.'

'Very shrewd and surprisingly sure of herself,' Jody thought. 'Looks more and more as though my absence has benefited Roseann no end.' 'Oh, well, what does it matter?' she said aloud. 'The main thing is, I'm free. And talking about changes, you've changed a lot yourself. It seems that life without Jody has done you a power of good. How is Uncle Perry? Well, and as blissfully ignorant as ever?' Adding that final sly dig hadn't been her intention but was out before she was able to prevent it.

Colour crept up under Roseann's skin. 'If you intend to go on sitting there being sarcastic and insulting, then there isn't much point in us continuing on with discussion!' she said stiffly.

'Interrogation, don't you mean? That's all our "discussions" ever were, weren't they? And, understandably so, this one promises to top all the rest. After all, there has been a big time lapse since our last. How is Uncle Perry anyway?'

The colour in Roseann's face receded. 'He's a considerable

lot better. It took some time for him to recover from his guilt complex after he had handed you over to Adam Slade, but he did, and he's fitter now than he has been for a long time.'

'Still drinking?'

'No, not any more. Seldom touches a drop.'

Jody inclined her head, grimacing in a marvelling way. It would appear that Roseann wasn't the only one benefiting from her departure from the Linton household.

'He would — it would make him very happy if you were to visit him,' Roseann suggested hesitantly. 'Not only would it help to relieve his mind but he would really love to see you again.'

Jody's eyes widened and then she laughed. 'You're joking, of course!'

'I wouldn't joke about such a thing!'

'Do you mean to tell me that he. . . . No, I can't believe that. Anyway, why should you be so concerned about Uncle's happiness or unhappiness all of a sudden? And why are you so keen on me visiting him? Aren't you afraid . . .?'

'No, I'm not afraid of you, Jody,' Roseann cut in. 'Of you or anyone. It's not within your power now to hurt us. As far as your uncle and I are concerned, you're no longer our responsibility now that you're no longer living under our roof. But if it will help Perry in any way, I'm quite prepared to have you visit us. Contrary to your beliefs, I care very much about whether or not he's happy or unhappy,' she ended quietly.

'Well, that's a change of tune,' Jody said wonderingly but not without a certain amount of scepticism.

'Which calls for a change of subject. I must say that you're much prettier wearing your hair its natural colour and dressed in that gay frock instead of those dreadul pants you

used to gad around in. You're looking a bit washed-out, though, if you'll excuse the expression. Nothing wrong, is there?'

'Wrong?' Jody echoed. She gave an ironic laugh as she asked herself what more could be wrong — and as she imagined herself confiding in Roseann, something she had never done before.

'Over a boy-friend, perhaps?' Roseann prodded.

Jody shook her head emphatically at this. It would never do if Roseann should suddenly hit upon the truth, fantastic though it was, and she was quite liable to do exactly that if her curiosity wasn't satisfied. 'You'd look pretty washed-out yourself if you were placed in sole charge of a group of squalling kids all day, every day,' she said quickly, diverting her attention away from the track in which it was heading.

'Kids?' Roseann repeated.

Reluctantly, Jody described the type of work she was doing and braced herself for the inevitable response which the stunned Roseann wasn't backward in giving.

'You — looking after children!' she exclaimed. Her laughter rang out filled with sheer amusement. 'It's incredible! And at a convent, of all places!' She shook her head and chuckled again. 'I can't wait to see the look on Perry's face when I tell him. This news should provide him with a few laughs for an hour or so.'

As Roseann prattled on, Jody felt her blood becoming colder and colder with an equally cold anger thundering in her head. How relieved she was now that she had obeyed her instinct and had not confided in her aunt. If the nature of her job proved to be so highly amusing she shuddered to think of what effect the revelation of her feelings in regard to Adam would have over her.

'You know, just for fun I might even add that you're thinking very seriously of entering the Convent,' Roseann remarked, her laughter bubbling up again.

On a blinding impulse, Jody pushed back her chair and stood up. Snatching her handbag from the chair beside her own, she stared down at her aunt with icy dignity. 'Why "just for fun"?' she asked. 'You can tell him exactly that because it happens to be the truth. Yes, that shocked you, didn't it? No doubt, when you get over the shock and will be capable of telling Uncle Perry, it will provide you both with entertainment, enough to last a few weeks!'

Once out in the sunlit Square again, she smiled grimly to herself as she recalled Roseann's face. She had looked as though she didn't know what had hit her. At least that bomb-shell should give her plenty to occupy her imagination with, without giving it the time or inclination to trail off in other directions.

What gave her the strength to face the next day was the thought of it being the last in the working week and that at eight the forthcoming evening she had a date with Alec. Also, it gave her morale a boost whenever she remembered the week-end stretching ahead of her and that it would be free from what she called the daily test of human endurance. So she tackled her job with renewed energy and bounce, keeping in mind the two things she had to look forward to.

To her surprise, as the day steadily progressed, she found it corresponding less and less with its usual pattern and was not seeming so much of an encumbrance as did the days preceding it. The children yielded to her as they had never done before and she found the problem she had of communicating in an easy relaxed manner quickly diminishing. She

even began to enjoy herself to an extent which astounded her.

Sister Maria's 'infants', however, weren't nearly so willing to co-operate and submit to the new-found technique she was practising. By the end of the drill lesson, a period that they clearly regarded as one during which they were free to run wild and do as they liked, Jody finally lost her patience, disappointed at the ending to an otherwise harmonious day. In a curt voice, she snapped at the children to line up in their respective teams. When they had complied and were standing in lines behind their team-leaders, she handed each leader a ball from a box, the home for their drill equipment, which stood on the grass a little distance behind her.

For some length of time the going was good and the children carried out her instructions, standing in individual circles playing the ball in the fashion she had showed them. Then, just as she was about to congratulate herself on being successful in getting them to capitulate, she saw one ball being deliberately thrown in wild abandon. It was followed by another, and then another and another.

It wasn't long before every ball, including those she had left sitting in the box, was being hurled here, there and everywhere, across the wide, grassy expanse of the playground, into hedges and trees and even a few well-aimed shots in her direction where she stood listening to the commotion and looking on in helpless dismay. From behind her, the sound of a pair of hands clapping sharply together saved her from having to make any effort to put a stop to the children's antics, for immediately they became still, abashed expressions on their downcast faces. Sister Maria ordered them into line and sent them on, back up to the school-room.

Jody, whose heart had long since plunged to a sickening depth, could barely bring herself to meet the kindly gaze of the nun, who gave her arm a sympathetic squeeze. 'Gather up the balls, Jody, and then come up and see me and we'll have a little talk. I think there's something worrying you, and if we talk it out I may be able to help in some way.'

Jody nodded, inwardly resolving to give in her notice come what may. One would need to be blind not to be able to tell, even from the beginning, that she was positively unsuited for a job such as this. But Sister Clare had told her that she herself had every confidence in her — and she couldn't dispute that, owing to unconsciously altering her tactics, she had achieved a number of unexpected results throughout the latter part of that day. She frowned pensively. If only she didn't have so many other things on her mind and could allot her full attention to the matter in hand as she had first hoped, but so far had failed to do, then she was sure she could make a success of things.

When Sister had gone, she wearily started to pick up balls from where they had landed on the grass or were visible, protruding from in and beneath the bushes. After she had counted them back into the box, she realized her suspicion that one had been caught amongst the branches of any one of the trees was correct. She scanned each of the trees in turn until she glimpsed the rubber ball's bright rainbow colours, through a weave of leaves and twigs. What a height! It must have taken an extra-powerful belt from one of the older boys to get it caught up there.

Thankful to discover that the tree itself would be a comparatively easy one to climb, she kicked off her sandals and climbed, without much difficulty, up its trunk and along one of its thick branches, edging closer towards the ball. As she crawled farther on, the branches about her, hemming her in,

were getting thinner and decidedly more prickly, jabbing into her cheeks and tangling her hair. Already her bare legs had been scratched by the rough bark of the trunk.

Stretching her arm as far as it could possibly reach, her fingers scraped against the ball, causing it to tilt and roll sideways. She watched it waver for a second or two, and then, as her gaze followed its journey to the ground, she felt the world lurch and rock dizzily, nearly tipping her from her perch. She clung to the branch tightly and when she opened her eyes again to peer below her, she had to accept that the man who stood holding the ball was definitely no hallucination.

Burning with mortification, she meekly inched her way back along the branch and slid down to the ground. Without uttering a word, she slipped her feet back into her discarded sandals and brushed at her overall with hands which later trembled as they took the ball from Adam's grasp. She found the courage to look up at him to find his gaze taking in her tumbled hair and scratched, dishevelled semblance. He was looking at her in the contemplative manner he would a grubby-faced minor whom he had caught raiding his apple trees on not the first occasion, and because she found herself cringing with guilt symptoms as if she was in fact an exposed, grubby-faced raider, Jody angrily pulled herself together. 'How did you know to find me here?' she demanded.

'Where? Up in a tree? Instinct, pure instinct,' Adam replied.

She shot him a withering glance. 'You know very well where I mean! Who told you? And why are you here anyway? I thought I'd made it clear that I never wanted to have anything more to do with you!' She jumped back as his hand reached out to her hair.

He held up the bit of broken twig he had swiftly disentangled from it and threw it away. The corner of his lips quirked as he watched her confusion and her hand lift to her hair. When she refused his offer of a cigarette, he lit one for himself and asked: 'How is your job here working out? I must admit I got the shock of my life when I found out. Are you liking it?'

'Loving it.'

'I was watching from the gate for some time and saw those kids go haywire.'

Jody shrugged. 'Naturally there are times when I'd like to knock their heads together,' she said, hoping that none of the venom she was feeling had leaked into her voice. 'But that still doesn't explain how you knew where to find me.'

'Your aunt rang me last night. She thought that if I didn't already know, I might be interested to learn where you were working and seeing that I intended coming in to town today, I thought I'd look you up. Your aunt also told me that you were thinking of embarking upon a career as a nun,' Adam paused.

Jody's fingernails bit savagely into her palms. 'I should have known I could have depended on Roseann!' she thought.

'It's surprising enough to learn of the kind of work you were doing,' he went on, 'but when it came to you entering a convent — well, I knew then that your aunt must have had her wires crossed somewhere. The idea of your entering a convent is about as improbable....'

'Improbable? What's improbable about it?' Jody interjected, suddenly released from the submissive state into which she had fallen when Adam had caught her totally unawares — and up a tree of all places! Because his visit had been so unexpected and her situation warranting another

of those detachedly amused gazes she was beginning to know so well, she had given up and surrendered without a struggle to the weak helplessness claiming her. 'Roseann finds it hilarious, you find it improbable. What has it got to do with either of you? It's the way I find it that matters, and I find the whole prospect a most inviting one!' she ended rashly.

Adam stared at her in the same way that Roseann had done. 'You mean you're actually . . .?'

'I've given very serious thought to the matter, and that's all you need to know.' She threw the ball back into its box and with the intention of going to fetch a couple of boys to carry it back into the school, began to walk quickly across the field.

'Jody!' Adam came alongside of her and took hold of her arm. 'I've known you to do some pretty crazy, half-witted things in the short time that I've been associated with you, and all due to an impetuous nature. If this is another idea, spurred on by a wild impulse, then I strongly recommend that you throw it in before it's too late.'

'I've told you, I've given it very serious thought. . . .'

He gripped her shoulders and swung her around as they stepped on to the concrete immediately surrounding the school. 'Knowing how very seldom it is that you give any thought, without it needing to be of a serious type, to anything you do *that* information does little to convince me. I demand more reassurance than that!'

'Really? And just what gives you the right to demand anything of me?'

'Cut out back-answering me and drop that fallacious self-righteousness and "I'm my own master" attitude. You should know by now that it's a useless waste of time trying that line out on me. Regardless of the reaction you manage to attain from your young friends, I don't buy it!' His grip on

her shoulders had tightened to such an extreme that for a split second Jody thought he was about to shake her. Then abruptly he relaxed and said with quiet urgency: 'Don't you realize just how serious a decision of this sort is? If you make a hasty decision now you could well regret it.'

Jody refused to answer.

'Jody, this is a kind of life one has to be absolutely certain that she's suited for. Are you really prepared to donate the rest of your life to a cause such as this and be willing to. . . .'

'Jody, so here you are! My dear, I'm really sorry, but I'm afraid we'll have to postpone our talk until another time.' Sister Maria approached them, fumbling in the pocket of her black habit for a handkerchief. Withdrawing it, she lifted her head and her voice trailed off as she caught sight of Adam. Her sharp glance missed no detail of Jody's appearance, her tousled hair and bright eyes, nor the man's hands on her shoulders. Maybe it was because she was pre-occupied that she at once drew the wrong conclusion. 'Well, perhaps there'll be no need for our discussion after all,' she smiled. 'I had always suspected that this was the reason — or at least had something to do with your lightning changes of mood and those sad faces you're constantly wearing.'

Adam's own face underwent a change of expression. His hands fell from Jody's shoulders and she could have quite cheerfully crawled away. What a calamitous misconception! At Sister's request, she introduced Adam and inwardly shrank a little further as Sister said in a bright, teasing voice: 'Well, I hope the two of you have made it up and you'll come to work a different girl on Monday, Jody. God bless you both.'

'Correct me if I'm wrong, but that to me doesn't sound

the kind of conversation one nun would conduct with a prospective novice,' Adam drawled after Sister had gone. 'Why did you lie?' his voice, without warning, altered and became harsh.

'I didn't lie! I told Roseann and I told you that I'd given the matter serious thought and so I had, but I decided against it in the end. Can I help it if both of you choose to misconstrue a simple statement I made?'

'In my book acting a lie is the same as telling a straight-out lie! And also, I asked you how you were liking your job. If what Sister said is true and you're sad and moody, then it can't be possible that you're "loving it". Who is the bloke behind all your misery? Surely it's not young what's his name — Johnson after such a short acquaintance?'

'I haven't seen Alec since I was introduced to him last Saturday. And Sister is imagining things. The kids are enough to wear anybody down after a while, especially if you're not used to dealing with them. But I think I'm getting the hang of it now.' She wished intensely that he wouldn't keep watching her in that narrow-eyed way.

She shifted uneasily and after a length of silence, he nodded. 'Your aunt did mention that you were looking as though you were overdoing things and could do with a rest.'

'Oh, I'll survive. My type always do, don't you remember? Besides, kids can't treat me any rougher than you did and I survived that all right, didn't I?' she ended sweetly.

His departure alleviated her tension and she was capable of breathing without restriction once more. When the state of her thoughts became less chaotic, she recalled all that had happened and felt that had Roseann been within available reach she would have gladly wrung her neck. Never had she dreamed that she would ring and pass her facetious story on to Adam, who in turn wasted no time in seeking

her out only to find her up a tree chasing rainbow-coloured balls. Then to top off humiliation, Sister had made her untimely arrival on the scene and added those final comments which came so close to the truth it wasn't funny.

She closed her eyes each time the incident rose into her mind and tried to push it aside. However, she was never more relieved when eight o'clock finally came bringing with it Alec's ring at the front doorbell.

Jody was understandably surprised when, on the following Monday night, the telephone rang and Cheryl held out the receiver to her. 'It's for you,' she said.

Jody gave a puzzled shrug. It wasn't very often that she received a call. Usually it was Cheryl who either made or received them. Assuming that it must be Alec, she reached for the receiver.

'It's a woman,' Cheryl enlightened her.

Then it could only be Roseann! 'Hello,' she breathed without enthusiasm into the mouthpiece.

'Hello, Jody?'

She almost dropped the instrument in her astonishment. It was Bess. She must have inquired at the Convent for the telephone number, but what on earth did she want? 'Yes, it's me,' Jody said, finding her voice.

'At last I've managed to trace you. It was a good thing that your aunt rang up the other night and let us know where you were.'

Jody sighed wearily. 'Why everyone wants to make it their business to know my whereabouts and goings on, I haven't the faintest idea.'

'Well, Shona can hardly send you an invitation to her engagement if she doesn't know your address, can she?'

At once Jody was fully alert. 'Engagement? But I thought

that that would have been over and done with long ago. It was unofficially announced at your birthday party last December.'

'That's right, but Shona considered it a good idea to wait until after Christmas and the New Year before becoming officially engaged. They're being married this Easter and want only a very short engagement.'

I'm honoured to think that everyone has gone to so much trouble to ensure that I receive an invitation. I didn't know that my presence was in such demand.'

'Naturally we've been anxious to know your whereabouts for other reasons as well. We rang the girls' hostel and were informed of your accident. Adam was furious because they hadn't let us know at the time it happened. He spent a lot of time in town trying to track you down. I'm told that when he did eventually locate you, he found you, drenched to the skin, standing on your head in the centre of the Square.'

Jody gritted her teeth, resisting the temptation to slam the receiver down on to its cradle. 'What I do is my own business! And if I need anyone to "track me down" I'll let you know.'

'Try to understand, Jody, that it's quite natural for us to be concerned for you — especially after having been given news of your accident,' Bess explained patiently. 'But don't let's argue about that. What I did ring you for is about this party. Would you like to come? It's being held over at the Barries' this Saturday.'

'No, I'm sorry but I can't make it.' To have heard once, even unofficially, of Shona and Adam's engagement had been enough for her.

'I realize that this is rather short notice, but the truth is I'm sure the Barries could use some extra help with the

preparations. I'll be giving them a hand and I thought that, because you had arranged mine so successfully in December, you might also be willing to help out with this one.'

'I'm sorry, but the answer is no.'

'You have already made a prior arrangement for Saturday?'

'No-o, but. . . .'

Then I'll tell you what I'll do. Think over what I've said and on Saturday I'll get Adam to send someone in to pick you up. If you change your mind then bring an overnight bag packed with a few extras, including your party frock. Oh, and bring your swimsuit too. I do hope you decide to come. 'Bye for now.' And then with a click, she had rung off.

'Well, can you beat that? Now what am I going to do?' Jody said as at that moment Cheryl came back into the lounge. She looked at her inquiringly and giving an exasperated groan, Jody described Bess's conversation.

'Mmmm, tough. If I had've been you I would've told her that I was going up to the mountains at National Park this week-end,' Cheryl informed her as Jody morbidly sat waiting for her to comment.

'Up to the mountains? What a hell of a lot of help you are!' Jody exploded. 'There's no snow up there at this time of year!'

Cheryl shrugged, unperturbed. 'Make up a fantastic excuse and they don't bother questioning it or giving it a second thought. It's only when you give them the "I'm going to wash my hair" gag that they begin to wonder.'

Jody digested this item of information and then shook her head. 'Well, it's too late for that now. . . .' she began when Cheryl's laughter told her that she had been merely indulging in a little leg-pulling. 'Cheryl! I'm serious!' she

exclaimed.

'I'm sorry,' Cheryl sobered. 'Look, either you want to go or you don't. Now which is it?'

'A little of both that's the trouble.'

Impatiently, Cheryl took her friend by the shoulders and gave her a shake. 'You want this guy? Then damn well go get him. It's not like you to let anything go without a fight.'

'But he's never been mine to let go!'

'A minor detail, and I guarantee that details, no matter how minor or major, have never daunted you in the past. Honestly, I would never have believed that it would be me talking to you this way. Now come on, and for heaven's sake, buck up! If you want him, fight for him! What have you got to lose?'

CHAPTER TEN

So, on Saturday afternoon, Jody found herself working continuously and automatically along with Bess and half a dozen or so other women who had also volunteered to help out and to whom she spoke only when spoken to. Otherwise she kept her mind blank to them and didn't even hear any of their chatter and laughter which seemed to be going on non-stop. She herself couldn't find anything to laugh at and certainly not when in the midst of making preparations for Adam's engagement party.

She was dreading the moment when she would eventually come into contact with him. She racked her brain for something that would be suitable to say and consequently the more she tried the more confused and panic-stricken she became. It was all very well for Cheryl to advise: 'If you want him, fight for him,' but what did she know? Had she ever been in a quandary similar to this? However, as it happened, Jody didn't see any sign of Adam before the party and couldn't quite decide whether to be disappointed or the reverse.

Late that afternoon, she showered and dressed in the Barries' beautiful, spacious bathroom and then went along to Shona's bedroom to dress. She was viewing her appearance in the full-length mirror when Shona herself came into the room.

'Oh, hello!' She stopped short at seeing Jody. 'I'm sorry, I didn't know you hadn't finished.'

'I have now. I'm just going.'

Shona smiled. 'There's no hurry, truly. I've just come to

search for my bathing-suit. I know I won't be able to find it. I never can, so I thought I'd better start looking now instead of rushing around at the last minute. You look very nice,' she added.

'Well, thanks.' Jody took in Shona's lemon lace frock with its slightly flared skirt, gold chain belt and her gold sandals. Her pale hair was shiny and her complexion glowing. 'You're quite a knock-out yourself.'

'Do you really think so?' Shona breathed anxiously, smoothing her hands down the skirt of her frock. The rays of the setting sun shining through the window caught the stone of her engagement ring, causing it to wink and sparkle.

Jody turned away. 'Sure I think so. I wouldn't have said it if I didn't.'

'Then I'm glad,' Shona said quietly. 'You see, I would like us to be friends.'

'Friends!' Jody almost laughed aloud as she imagined what Shona would say if she knew what she had in mind.

'Yes — but if you don't think — if you don't want. . . .'

'After all I've said and done to you?'

Shona laughed and caught Jody by the shoulders. 'All that you have said and done to me has, I feel, worked out for the best, and it's stopped me doing something I might have regretted for the rest of my life.'

'What kind of disaster have I unwittingly prevented?' Jody asked dryly.

'My marrying Adam. If it hadn't been for you the two of us might have made the biggest mistake of our lives, drifted into a marriage which would have been built on the foundation of friendship, close warm friendship — but not love.'

When it penetrated, the meaning of her words carried an

impact so powerful that for a second Jody felt herself reeling backwards. It was as though she had been given a push by a strong invisible hand. The room seemed to tilt like a boat on an uneven keel that would, she thought, capsize if she didn't exercise some form of control over her whirling senses.

'Jody, are you all right? You've gone terribly pale all of a sudden.' Shona's voice came from a long way off.

'Who — who are you — who is your fiancé?' Jody asked, pulling herself together.

'Why, Dad's foreman, Ross Birchell.'

'But on the night of Bess's birthday party last December, your father said that you and — Adam. . . .'

'Oh, I know.' Shona threw up her hands and laughed. Sitting down on the end of her bed, she explained: 'Dad, I think, had had one too many. He also had, and always has had it fixed firmly in his head that one day Adam and I would get married. Everyone around these parts had always assumed that one day I would marry one of the Slade brothers. But although I'm very fond of Adam and was very fond of Brent, I love only Ross. I didn't want to. I fought it every step of the way. I wanted to believe that what I felt for Adam was love.'

'But why?'

'Because never having been in love before, the emotion was a frightening and unknown one and I wanted to cling to what I knew and understood. Oh, I know you've already written me off as silly, weak and cowardly, and I guess I am.'

This statement was so true that Jody suffered a spasm of guilt. 'What do your parents say to all this? Your father particularly, now that he realizes you won't be marrying Adam after all?'

'Oh, he's accepted the situation. Actually he likes Ross. He always has, and he respects and admires him, so he's quite happy about it. The only thing poor Dad isn't so struck on is the fact that Ross has bought a farm out Eketa-hunt way and that means he'll be losing not only a daughter but an excellent foreman as well, but given time he'll come round and get used to the idea.'

'I'm glad, and I do congratulate you. I hope both of you will be very happy.'

'Thank you, Jody. I know you mean that.'

'Shona, about Brent. . . .'

Just then Mrs. Barrie's voice called, interrupting them. 'Shona! Your guests are arriving.'

'Oh, heavens! Already! I'll have to find time to look for my swimsuit later.'

'When Shona had gone, Jody sat down on the end of the bed, as she had done, and began to sort out in her mind this sudden overwhelming turn of events. So Adam had been stringing her along ever since that night, letting her, as she always managed to do so successfully, view the whole affair out of perspective and on the spur of the moment do something which she later regretted.

Her cheeks burned as she thought back on what he had said to her and how he had humiliated her. Even then he had not enlightened her. All this time! All this time he had deliberately let her go on believing that he and Shona Slowly, her temper began to seethe.

Outwardly calm, she left the bedroom and went outside to join the rest of the guests. Her eyes searched the crowd that was gathering, but she couldn't see Adam amongst them. Spotting Bess, she went over to her side. 'I haven't seen Adam since I arrived. Where is he?' she asked with a mildness she was far from feeling.

'Gone down to the Reserve to look for a suitable spot in which everyone can swim later. He should be back by now. I don't suppose you would mind going down to see if you can find him?'

'Not at all'.

'Give him a shove along. The party is nearly in full swing.'

'I'll certainly do just that,' she promised sweetly.

Totara Reserve was not very far from the Barries' farm, a short distance up on the other side of the road, through an opening of native bush and across a stretch of grass, cleared for the convenience of picnickers. It was a beautiful spot with tall, thick trunks of native egergreens everywhere, their branches and green leaves high above her blocking out the sky. Everything looked and smelled green and fresh.

Suddenly she stopped. In front of her she saw Adam standing, with his hands in his pockets, on a large smooth piece of rock jutting out over the river. She knew that particular rock so well. She had often dived from there in years gone by. Adam had his back towards her and his head down. His pose suggested that he was deep in thought about something.

Jody crept up behind him, careful so that he wouldn't hear her. When she was standing directly behind his back, she gave him a sudden hard push.

'Hey!' His startled yell broke the silence. Even if that hadn't, the resounding splash of him hitting the water below certainly would have.

'Well, well, well!' she mocked. 'Fancy anyone being so careless as to fall into a river considerably bigger than a horse-trough, don't you think? And it's still daylight, too!'

'Jody! I'll tan the living daylights out of you when I

catch up with you!' Adam shouted.

She laughed. 'Come, come, lover boy, you won't have time. Shona is already missing *one* of her fiancés. The wet one!'

There was silence, and looking below her she could just make out the shadowy outline of Adam beneath the surface of the clear, deep water. Then his head broke the surface and he shouted: 'Jody! I can't swim!'

'Then damn well drown — and good riddance!' Jody shouted back. When he didn't reply she peered over the edge of the rock. But he was nowhere to be seen. She couldn't even make out his figure in the river's crystal-clear depths. 'Smart-alec!' she thought, and waited.

Two or three minutes slipped by and still no Adam emerged above the surface, or along the river bank. She scanned the area, trying to ignore the twinge of concern nagging at her. However, as the minutes dragged on she couldn't stop herself becoming more and more tense. Finally, she was unable to stand the ominous silence a moment longer. 'Adam!' she called. 'Adam!'

No answer.

A few seconds later: 'Adam! Answer me, damn you!' Panic made itself heard in her voice. 'I know you're fooling, so if you don't show yourself this instant I'll drown you myself!'

Still no answer.

In desperation, and with a sob of half anger and half despair, Jody kicked off her silver shoes and, in her ice-blue silk frock, she dived into the river, its depths darkening as the night fell faster with each passing minute. Swimming from one side of the river to the other, above and under the water, she called and searched for Adam, but to no avail. In the end, panting and sobbing, her lungs feeling

near to bursting point, she was forced to give up.

She was treading water, listening to her own sobs and the lapping of the water, when suddenly she let forth a terrified scream as two hands closed about her waist. She fought, kicking and clawing at what was imprisoning her.

'Stop struggling and quit scratching,' said a voice in her ear. 'You've got claws on you like a cat!'

Adam! She went limp with relief. He wasn't drowned after all. He was alive. Then all at once her thankfulness and relief vanished as she realized what that meant. Once again she was furiously angry — livid would have been a better word.

She wrenched around in his grasp and faced him. Her tongue lashed him and she hit him with clenched fists, her energy restored even though her breath wasn't. 'I hate you!' she sobbed. 'Hate you! Hate you! I wish y-you'd been drowned! I wish you were dead!'

Without a word he swam with her to the bank, lifted her still wriggling madly, into his arms and walking into the shelter of the trees, laid her down on the grass, holding her down with his arm as she struggled to sit up.

She continued fighting and twisting until her source of energy was once more completely drained. At last, admitting defeat, she lay still. Glaring up at his composed expressionless face above hers, she was fully aware of her own wildly flushed one.

'Ohhh!' she grated furiously through closed teeth.

He merely laughed and, angrily, she tossed her head on the lush green grass.

'I'm — I'm going to — to leave here, and right now, and I hope — hope I never — ever see you again!' she managed with breathless vehemence.

He laughed again. 'As you are, you're in no position to

make a departure of any kind.'

'You...!'

'Ah-ah,' he interrupted, shaking his head. 'You asked for all you've got, so there's no need to blame me. You're never going to change.'

'I thought we'd already settled that some months ago!' Jody snapped, breathing deeply. 'We'd decided that I'm going to be written off as a hopeless case. Remember?'

'Yes — in need of a firm hand and a firm hand you're going to get. My hand!'

'Like hell!'

'And the first thing you're going to learn is that ladies don't swear.'

'I'm no lady!'

Adam made a mocked, painful grimace. 'You can say that again! Still, you'll learn.'

'Hah!'

'Hah!'

She glared up at him silently and then: 'I was under your firm hand for a whole three months and where did it get either of us? Nowhere!'

'But the future's going to hold one considerable and major difference.'

'And what difference is that? You tried just about everything and more than I could ever have thought up.'

'You mean to tell me that you, with your out-of-proportion imagination and amazing aptitude for leaping to conclusions, haven't thought of this one?'

She stiffened as his head lowered and she felt his lips rest lightly and fleetingly on her own. 'No!' she snapped violently, as soon as his head lifted.

'No?' he repeated. 'How about that?' He kissed her again, a little less lightly and a little less fleetingly. 'Well?'

'No!'

He sighed. 'How long is it going to take to change your mind? If we remain here all night you'll not only wind up having to marry me, but you'll also catch a cold, and I don't particularly fancy a bride with a cold.'

She opened her mouth and from her expression Adam guessed he was about to be sworn at again. This time his kiss wasn't at all light or teasing and, although she fought against it, she felt the anger and power to resist leave her.

'Well?' he murmured against her mouth.

For several minutes her two overwhelming and conflicting emotions continued their pull, each in different directions. At last, the corners of her lips lifting reluctantly, she whispered: 'You're going to have to do better than that.' Then her arms, of their own accord, slipped up around his neck. Her hand pressed against the back of his head and fire flared through her as at her response his mouth grew more passionate, more demanding.

'I love you, darling,' he whispered huskily, after a while. 'Marry me and don't ever change.'

'You shouldn't say things like that,' she laughed a little shakily, running a finger over his lips. 'You might rue the day you said them.'

'There's no "might" about it,' he said.

Some time later, when darkness had well and truly fallen, Adam stirred reluctantly. 'Come on, we'd better get back. We've still yet to change out of these wet clothes.'

'Oh, must we?' Jody protested.

'Yes, darling, we must. It won't be long before the others start to arrive for their swim.'

On the way back to Riverview a sudden thought occurred to Jody. 'Adam, what will your aunt have to say about this

when she finds out?’

He smiled. ‘I think Aunt Bess has suspected this all along.’

‘Very perceptive, I must say. Doesn’t she object, or has she objected? I know she couldn’t take me at all when I was going with Brent and certainly not when you first brought me here — neither could you — but I thought that perhaps she had begun to like me a little, even in spite of my being the instigator of Brent’s death.’ By mentioning Brent’s name she had opposed her better judgement, but it had cropped up before she could prevent it. Sensing the tension creep in between them, separating them, she shivered with a cold that was not brought about by her wet condition.

‘Jody: . . .’ Adam began.

‘Yes?’

‘There’s something I want to tell you. Something I’ve been meaning to tell you for a long time.’

‘Yes, what is it?’ Instinct told her that whatever he had to tell her was in connection with Brent, and she knew an alarming fear.

Adam pulled up at the top of the driveway and patted her hand. ‘Don’t look like that. It’s nothing you’ve done. This time it’s I who have, in a way, wronged you.’ He paused. ‘Let’s go inside and we’ll get changed first. When you’re ready, wait for me on the veranda.’

However, it was Adam who had finished dressing first and was pacing the veranda, smoking.

She stood outlined in the doorway dressed in the brown hipster skirt and cream blouse which she had packed and brought with her. Her hair, brushed dry, was left hanging freely to her shoulders. ‘It is about Brent, isn’t it?’

Adam hesitated and then nodded. ‘You have a right to

know this and should have known about it a good deal sooner. I didn't tell you before because — well, because I wanted you to suffer as much as possible to make you pay for causing Brent's death.'

Jody swallowed, She didn't want to hear what he had to say, but found herself urging him to go on.

'That night you first met Brent we were celebrating my birthday....'

'Yes, I know. Brent told me.'

'Did he also tell you that we hadn't very long before then left after a visit to the hospital?'

Jody shook her head.

'Well, we had. Some weeks prior to that, Brent had been admitted to hospital for various check-ups and tests. He didn't know what they were for. Only I knew that. And that day, my thirty-first birthday, I was told that Brent had leukaemia.'

'Leukaemia!' Jody whispered, horrified. 'But — but I can't believe it! He was so healthy. Looked so fit and healthy!'

'And all the time he was dying. Even if he hadn't been killed, I doubt whether he would be alive today.'

'And yet....'

'And yet I let you suffer the burden of guilt in allowing you to think that you had caused the death of a very fine healthy and life-loving boy? I know, and I'm sorry.'

'You're sorry!' She closed her eyes and remembered the many tortured, sleepless nights she had spent, the agony of mind when she was awake. 'If you only knew what I've been through, when all the time I had, in a way, done both you and Brent a favour, saved him from a slow and painful death.'

'That's right, but had I let you go then you would never

have known, and if you had, you would never have appreciated that fact as much as you do now.'

'But why? Why at least didn't you tell me earlier?'

'Jealousy was perhaps one of the reasons.'

'Jealousy?'

'Of the fact that I knew Brent didn't have very long to live and that the opportunity of making the remainder of his life happy wasn't mine. And you reminded me of this in no uncertain terms here at Riverview that night you burned the shearers' dinner.'

'I was cruel, but I've already explained to you that I was talking wildly. Lying would be more correct.'

'Yes, although I knew that in some ways it was the truth. It wasn't in my power to make his last few months happy, instead it was in yours — a selfish, thoughtless and spoilt, self-willed child. But what made me so angry was the knowledge that you could, and probably would, snatch back that happiness at any time. I was at my wits' end wondering how I was going to stop this, when suddenly he was dead.'

There was silence. Jody walked across the veranda and leaned her hands on the wooden balustrade surrounding it. 'You must have hated me.'

'At the time I think I did.'

'You know you did — and so did Bess.'

'No. I told Bess about Brent's health shortly after I brought you here. From that moment on I think she was secretly grateful to you, for she knew how elated and happy Brent was after he had met you. He was always talking to her about you.'

'Why didn't Brent have treatment of some kind? Blood transfusions or something?' she asked bewilderedly.

'No treatment of any kind would have helped in the long

run, and so I thought it best if Brent didn't know. He would have preferred it that way.' Adam went on: 'And he would have preferred to go the way he did rather than the way he would have had he lived.'

All at once a great load seemed to ease from Jody's mind and heart. 'Then you — you can really forgive me for what I've done?' she held her breath. 'I feel, somehow, that Brent has, but — but have you?'

'There's plenty of forgiving to be done on both sides. I love you, Jody, and that to me is everything.'

'For me too,' Jody whispered, looking at him.

'Are you sure, Jody?'

'Yes, I'm positive — though I ought to actively dislike you,' she reproached. 'From December to April, three months of nothing but torment!'

'Three months of happenings and experiences you wouldn't otherwise have had.'

'Happenings and experiences I could well have done without!'

'Do you mean you could well have done without that profoundly unselfish inclination towards the religious life?'

'Don't joke! It was very real to me at the time and it was something I felt very strongly about.'

'I'm not joking,' Adam assured her quietly. 'The vocation is a most worthwhile one — to a person who is born for it.'

'Oh, I know that I'm not such a person. I'm under no misapprehension that I'm unselfish, or fanatically dedicated to pledge my entire life to any cause, no matter how worthwhile.'

'Not even marriage?' Adam spoke intensely after her eyes gave him all the answers he required: 'When you marry me, you know what it will mean, don't you? Are you ready

to pledge your life to me and give up your freedom?’

‘Freedom! What freedom?’ she demanded with a soft, joyful laugh. Going to him, she wound her arms around his neck. ‘If your definition of freedom means living like I’ve done ever since I left Riverview, then I don’t want it.’

‘You’d prefer to live in the country for the rest of your life? There’ll be no running into the city whenever you feel like it.’

‘It’s no good. You can’t talk your way out of this one.’ She shook her head. ‘Face up to your fate.’ She brushed her lips against his.

‘I’m serious, Jody.’

She tightened her arms. ‘So am I,’ she whispered. ‘Oh, Adam — why? Why did you let me go on believing that you were in love with Shona? I couldn’t bear the thought of the two of you being married. I had to get it out of my mind somehow and I thought that obtaining a job which commanded all of my attention and energy would help me forget. But those kids — every single one of them I looked at seemed to me to be younger, angelic replicas of either you or Shona. I think at those times I was so desperate I was capable of doing anything.’

‘Mmmm, but for some reason I can’t picture a nun standing on her head in the Square of Palmerston North. It wouldn’t be practical and neither would it be acceptable, not even when practised by a girl once called Jody,’ Adam said humorously.

Frowning, Jody started to draw back, only to be imprisoned by the tightening of his arms. ‘I thought you were the one who wanted to be serious!’

‘I am. Do you think I enjoyed those three months you were gone? Especially when I learned that you were no longer living at the hostel and I had no idea where you had

disappeared to, then being told that you'd met with an accident about which I hadn't been notified? Do you really believe that I enjoyed the suspense of worrying and wondering where you were, what you were doing, conjuring up all sorts of imaginary ideas of what might be happening?

'Then why did you let me go?' she cried, her eyes anxiously searching his. Then making her own assumption, she said: 'You were just like Roseann, weren't you? Doubting whether my change was anything more than an outward one, thinking that probably I was still essentially the same Jody who, when let go free, would immediately take up where she had left off in her old way of life and old type of friends?'

'One of these days you're going to get into a lot of trouble if you continue to take notice of that misguided imagination of yours. I had to let you go. I had to be positive that you knew whether what you were aware of was the real thing.'

You mean — you knew? Ever since that night . . . ?'

'I knew how I felt about you and I did suspect that you felt the same way, but I had to be sure. You were immature then and you're still very young — are you sure now that you know what you're doing?'

She clung to him. 'I love you, Adam. I've never loved anybody — not anybody, before. I've never even imagined that I've been in love, or pretended to love my uncle and aunt, or my parents when they were alive, and in return nobody, other than Brent, has ever loved or pretended to love me. But that's not so surprising. I'm not really the most lovable person in the world. Well, when some poor guy commits the folly of falling in love with me — do you think I'm going to stand by and let him get away just because he thinks I'm too young to know what I'm doing? Not likely!

I know what I'm doing all right!' she ended so fiercely that he laughed a little unsteadily and pulled her closer.

'Feeling sorry for yourself?' she asked against his ear.

'Not in the least. What makes you ask?'

'You told me that night I fell into the horse trough that you'd pity the poor man who committed the folly of falling in love with me.'

Adam laughed. 'At the time I was feeling very sorry for the man who'd committed the folly of falling in love with you.'

'And taking it out on me!' she accused.

'Because you kept doing the thing that I learned to love you for but which annoyed me no end — misconstruing every conceivable situation'

'But that's not fair! At that party I heard Jim Barrie say, clearly and precisely, that Shona and you were engaged!'

'Not clearly and precisely, but slurred and a little too merry, and if you'd stayed around a while longer, instead of getting up on to your high horse, you would have heard him being corrected and Ross and Shona's engagement being unofficially announced.'

Jody sighed. 'Tell me, honestly, is there any hope for me?'

Adam considered the question very seriously and said finally, a smile in his eyes: 'With firm, careful handling you might just manage to muddle through.'

She rubbed her cheek against his and leaned back in his arms. She looked up at him, happy as she would never have believed it possible for her to be. His eyes were regarding her, no longer with contempt, or impatience, or tolerance, but with a deep love — and need. To love and need Adam, and to be loved and needed by him, she would want nothing else filling the places in her heart which had been empty

for so long. But even with this new and wonderful discovery, Jody was still Jody.

‘You and your obsession to boss me around,’ she said. ‘I can see that we’re not going to get along at all!’

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the story of jody

"Believe me, Jody, this is no joke." Adam's dark eyes held hers, and for the first time in her life she felt afraid. Really afraid.

Her aunt and uncle, Detective Morgan, the magistrate and the people who had to bear the brunt of her escapades had never made her quake as Adam had.

Jody wanted to say she was sorry, but how could she? Being sorry wasn't going to change anything. Everything she touched or came in contact with she seemed to destroy.

